

Sanut, Wayawaya, and the Naimbag a Biag in Ilokano Philosophy

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Abstract

The essay articulates the fundamental connection of some of the basic concepts in Ilokano ethos as lived in the everyday in order to understand the basic contradictions of the Ilokano way of being in the world (Ilokano ontology), of being in a society marked by good intentions but evil practices. The notion of the good life as a political concept is explored, and its connection to knowledge (Ilokano epistemology) and freedom is established.

Keywords: *karadkad, lung-aw, kuranges, pia, sanut, wayawaya, pia, good life, Ilokano ontology, Ilokano epistemology, practice of freedom*

Mapping the Context

This work explores the connection of three concepts in the everyday life of the Ilokano. These concepts—*sanut*, *wayawaya*, and *naimbag a biag*¹—are part of what we could call the aspirations of a people. *Sanut* is wisdom. *Wayawaya* is freedom. And *naimbag a biag* is the sense of the good life. In many ways, this work is a continuation of my other explorations on “social justice in the Ilokano mind,” on “*adal* and *sursuro*” and its connection to “*sanut*,” and on the issue of “*wayawaya*” found in my creative writing pursuits and in my various lexicographic work. In this article, I offer this perspective: the reflection done by the committed and engaged Ilokano people as gleaned from their everyday language is itself a variety of philosophy.

I will not enter into a debate proving that there is an “Ilokano philosophy.” Instead, I will assume that there is. To wrap up the discussion, I shall explore what I call the Ilokano problem and what is keeping the Ilokano from having a good life, from enjoying freedom, and from being unengaged with his *sanut*. I shall approach my exploration by using a tool in my lexicographic work on the Ilokano language: the use of *punget-a-ramut a balikas*² or PAR. (literally: stump-root word).

¹All Ilokano concepts will be italicized and operationally defined during the first time these are used. Hereafter, these are written as “normal” words. Many of these concepts have been discussed in previous works, hence, self-referencing has been avoided.

² Otherwise, rendered as PAR in this essay.

That tool will be supplemented by the analysis of the morphophonemic development of that PAR by reconstructing the affixes and explaining the changes in the meaning of the derived words because of the affixes and discursive social contexts in which these are employed and deployed.

Sanut ken Sursuro: Wisdom and Education

Sanut is wisdom. It is not the same as adal, or knowledge gained from spending years in schools and formally learning the rudiments of a profession in that one hopes that the skills will be translatable to meeting the minimum qualifications of a job. Sanut comes from experience, from living life to the full, from having character, from opening oneself up to the challenges of becoming a person, from engaging with others, with life, with the world, and with society.

Another sense of sanut leads us to reflect on the kind of mind the nameless Ilokano ancestors had in coming up with the word: sanut as a whip³. The connection between sanut as wisdom and sanut as whip leads us to the “training” of Ilokano parents in the past. Now frowned upon by Philippine law and by some enlightened practices of today’s parents and child development psychologists, the sanut as whip was used sparingly when a child needed to be taught important lessons in life. To this day, the elderly and middle-aged still recall how

³ There are synonyms of the sanut as whip: ablat, baut, latiko.

during their maturation years, they had a taste of the sanut as whip. Through this they came to understand their errors and learned more wisely because of their experience with the whip. In that Ilokano past, there was some “normalization” of the employment of the sanut as whip. While it was not used by all parents and adults, it was understood as a last resort to make foolish and unruly youth understand that the world is bigger than themselves, that there are universal references of good manners and right conduct, and that lacking the first principles of human action is tantamount to acting either amorally or immorally.

It is clear from this contour of Ilokano mind that there are discernible acceptable social standards even if these are not at times properly spelled out but are presumed to be understood by younger people. This leads us to the semiotic power of sanut as whip—it does not have to be the literal sanut, but the sanut that we encounter in life. It suggests that life is a difficult text in the way the radical hermeneuts understood life as text, with its cheerful beginnings, its complex plots and conflicts, and its unnerving series of endings. Life whips us up with the tragic, consequential events that lead us to take stock of how we could struggle honorably, with experiences that enervate our energy and thus lead us to question life’s worth. “*Sanutannaka ti biag no dika agaluad*” goes the adage: Life will whip you up if you are not careful.

There is that classic statement used among Ilokanos when they pass judgment on the character of a person: “*Adda adalna*

ngem awan sursurona’ (He has a formal education but has no wisdom.) Here, we are invited to consider a dichotomy which does not have to be: that chasm between formal learning and the perceptive, intuitive form of knowledge one must possess: *sursuro*.

Sursuro is a measure suggesting the kind of person one is. One can have sursuro even if one has not attended school, seen a book, memorized an alphabet, met a teacher, or graduated with a degree. On the other hand, *adal* as formal learning is meant to lead to sursuro even if this does not happen to everyone. Hence, that moral judgment: “You have a degree from the university but you have no manners. You are educated but you do not qualify as a person” (“*Addaanka iti adal manipud iti universidad ngem awan sursurom. Addaanka iti adal ngem saanka a maibilang a tao.*”) In the everyday life of the Ilokano, this is a reality. It could serve as the ultimate put-down. When an individual with a formal education wants to humiliate another, he or she erases both the individuality of that person and whatever is attached as accidents—his education included. It is, in fact, a rejection of his very existence: “You spent years in school, you spent so much money, you supposedly learned from your teachers, but pathetically, you did not. Your years in school are a waste. You have failed to become a wise person” (“*Nagbasaka iti adu a tawen iti eskuelaan, nagburborka iti adu a kuarta, sinanamakami a nakaadalka kadagiti mangisursurokenka, ngem ania a nagkaro a kasasaad ta saanka man laeng a nakasursuro.*”) In these

declarations, we know one thing: adal, the good kind, must lead to sursuro. Sursuro, employed rightly, must lead to sanut or its other names: *laing*, *salinwetwet*, *sirib*.

Wayawaya and Sanut: Freedom and Wisdom

Wayawaya, a reduplicated word, from *waya*, is a fossilized form. The national artist, Francisco Sionil Jose, renders this as “*waywaya*,”⁴ a syncopation. In his mythologized story, “Waywaya,” Sionil Jose makes us imagine a canvas of the “primitive” (perhaps precolonial) tribal Ilocos as suggested by the toponymic and demonymic evidences. There is the Daya tribe, a tribe from the East; there is the Laud tribe, one from the West. There is Dayaw (honor), Parbangon (dawn), Ulo (head, leader, chieftain), and Waywaya (freedom, independence).

The two tribes, in their relentless war against each other, were unable to imagine that war would never offer them freedom but fear, instability, chaos, and death. That failure is ingrained in the individuals of both tribes. That failure is also ingrained in the collective psyche of the “*umil?*” of each tribe, their “*il?*” (town) is marked by their location in the cartography of their world and relationship and in the geography of their pain and their tragic memory. Their learned “tribal ways” passed on from one generation to the next defined them and they called this—wrongly—freedom.

⁴ See his anthology of short stories, *Waywaya and Other Stories from the Philippines*. Philippine American Literary House, 1995.

The normalization of the tribal ways without questioning what is borne of sanut led Dayaw to follow the same tribal DNA of abducting a woman from the other tribe and making her his wife. Waywaya the Laud maiden would not be accepted by the Daya people. Despite this, she conscientiously performs her wifely duties until she gives birth to an unnamed son whose birthing leads to her death. Dayaw decides to bring the dead Waywaya back to her tribe. There, in the other tribe's homeland, he waits for his fate.

In this narrative, we see exactly the abuse and excess of wayawaya, and the tribal solution to its reclaiming whether that act of reclamation is personal or collective. In the ways of the tribes, it meant only death to the offender, to that one who had deprived another's freedom.⁵ In this story, we see a glimpse of what extremes wayawaya can offer us: their "freedom," and thus, their capacity to abduct others in order to deprive them of their own sense of wayawaya. We know that the nature of abduction is such that power is uneven: the abductor always given the free hand and the abductee dealt with according to the terms of abduction unilaterally decided upon by the abductor. As in all values, the axiology in the Ilokano wayawaya is one of bifurcation. One end of the pole is this dream of being and becoming free in the full sense of the word.

⁵ Here we see Dayaw of the Laud tribe kidnapping Waywaya of the Daya tribe.

In that quest for wayawaya, there could be war, there could be blood, there could be a protracted struggle, as in the case of the continuing struggle of the Philippine underground movement to read and reread social reality for us. The reading and re-reading offering us an alternative to the oppressive rule and reign of the elite political class since Manuel Luis Quezon, who during the Commonwealth Regime started to express his preference over who should rule and reign in the country.⁶ In the backdrop of both the underground movement and Quezon's sense of "hell" is wayawaya, that value sought after in the quest for that elusive human happiness. In its PAR form, wayawaya is "waya": unfettered, unchained. It is let loose. There is no one commanding another to do. There is freedom of movement. There are no restraints. There is no one dictating what one can and cannot do. Without the first principles providing delimitation to wayawaya, this can turn into a license.

But that is not what it is in the Ilokano mind. Wayawaya as an articulation of a substantive provides that the human actor is not subjected to another, that one can move about easily without hindrance, and that one can freely speak his mind when the situation calls for it. There is a reference to this waya to another concept whose meaning has been

⁶ Here we summon his preference for the country run like hell by Filipinos themselves than run like heaven by Americans. The context of this is the burning desire to be free and to be independent, and Quezon justified that preference by invoking the Filipino rulers' remembrance of the "blood of the heroes."

bastardized: paway. Paway⁷ speaks of “being able to do things in one’s own terms,” “being able to do it alone,” “being able to accomplish things without depending on another” or “without the help of other people.” The adjectival form that comes from the verb-form, “agpawpaway” (or another verb form, “makapaway”) suggests a person not needing another person’s direction, guidance, instruction. It suggests as well the capacity to go solo, to accomplish an action alone. In the Ilokano farming mindset, they have a term for letting the work animals go their merry way of grazing the best of the greens: pawayway. The elders would tell the younger people: “*Pawaywayanyo ta nuang idia’y Lusod*” (“Loosen the rein of the carabao in Lusod.”) In another context, it is giving some leverage to a person, to give an alternative to a person in debt, to dispense understanding, and thus, to have that sanut to understand the difficult human condition: “*Ikkam ti pawayway dayta tao. Kasta ti nasayaal*” (“Give some leverage to that person. That is how you demonstrate your goodness.”)

Naimbag a Biag: The Good Life

Historians of the Philippines talk about the more than 300 uprisings staged and waged by Filipinos against Spanish colonization. That translates to an average of about one uprising for each year that the colonizers remained in the

⁷ Its Castellano form is “paoay”: it accounts for “Paoay”, the Ilocos Norte town known for its baroque church.

country until Spain finally sold the country to the United States at US\$20 million. The uprisings signaled the indigenous people's articulation of the duty to pursue *naimbag a biag*⁸, the good life. For three centuries, that population had known nothing but the pealing of the bells, the privileged education of the elites in parochial schools, and the dance of partnership between the Philippine elites and the Spanish colonizers. That political dance marked by opportunism and greed would become the set-up between the Philippines and the United States before and after the sale via the Treaty of Paris.

The sense of the good life in *naimbag a biag* speaks of the socioeconomic condition of the person, with *lung-aw* (progress) as one of the fundamental markers. *Lung-aw*, a part of the Ilokano pantheon, is the god of progress. When that Ilokano greeting masked off as a question⁹ about how one is—“*Mag-ankayo?*”—is asked, there would be the predictable response, assuming one is in good health, is going through life as rosily as possible: “*Naimbag met, apo*” (“We are okay, apo.”) There would be an addition to the response—or it comes as its own, independent of the first sentence: “*Kastoy*,

⁸ The *naimbag a biag* requires several other concepts: *pia*, *karadkad*, and *lung-aw*. The phrase “*nasayaat a biag*” is the dynamic synonym of the “*naimbag a biag*.” Either phrase could substitute the other.

⁹ Among rural Ilokanos until today, the greeting comes off not as a function of the mornings, afternoons, or evenings but a function of “how one is” or “where is one going.” Ilokanos do not usually say “Good morning to everyone unless they are trained with these formalities and courtesies in the schools.”

apo, nakalung-aw met bassiten datao” (“I am okay, apo, we have been able to get by a little bit.”) There would be variations of the same theme, all speaking of their share of the good life in the everyday. Other references would be to the *pia* (health or well-being), to the *karadkad* (strength, also hinting health), and to the *salun-at* (health, sanity) of the other.

This trio—*pia*, *karadkad*, *salun-at*—all lead to the *lung-aw*, that sense of progress that is both economic and social. The fundamental criterion in the sense of the *naimbag a biag* is the ability to breathe properly and most freely, with the *anges* invoked as a reference to life continuing and life being lived (“*Kastoy, apo, umang-anges pay laeng datao*”—“I am okay, apo, I am alive”) and thus, is still alive (“*Kastoy, sibibiag pay met laeng datao*”—“I am okay, I am still breathing”) and not dead. A complaint about life would be: “*Ay, diak met la makaangesen*” (“Oh my, I have not been able to breathe.”) The reference to breathing—to the aeration of the lungs in physiological terms—leads us back to the concept of *lung-aw*. The absence of *lung-aw*—of that ability to get out of the water—leads us to imagine a wretched, miserable human condition, that of being *mangurkurances*. A fossilized noun, *mangurkurances*¹⁰

¹⁰ Following a morphophonemic analysis, *mangurkurances* would be: *mang+kur+kurang+anges*, and then syncopated as such, with two PARs forming a portmanteau, *kurang + anges*, and then the prefix (*mang*) and the reduplication (*kur*). *Kurang* (understood as a descriptor, means ‘insufficient’ or ‘lacking’ while *anges* means ‘breath’; by way of a portmanteau, the new word formed is ‘*kuranges*,’ a condition of absence or lack of breath.

has moved from a noun to a verb and then to a new noun in that surprising way the Ilokanos language their experiences.

Lung-aw is also surfacing from the water in order to breathe. The physiologic inhalation and exhalation, that bringing in and out of the lungs, of the needed air for the body to have *salun-at*, *pia*, *karadkad*, and thus to have the *naimbag a biag* even if only temporarily. In semiotic terms, a person getting into the womb of water without having the needed air supply would mean death. Rising from the water after having been submerged is thus a return to breathing, a return to life, an inauguration of the good life awaiting the person.

Panagabel: Tying the Loose Ends

After exploring *sanut*, *wayawaya*, and *naimbag a biag* in the everyday life of the Ilokano, we now need to tie the loose ends by going back to each thread and weaving a tapestry of meaning. If *sanut* is what is needed to have a good life, if *wayawaya* is needed to have a good life, and if the good life requires both *sanut* and *wayawaya*, what is holding the Ilokano to pursue the ends of a life lived fully?

If these preliminary concepts are there for the Ilokano to return to, what has made him forget that Ilokano problem that he needs to define and that Ilokano problem that has made him unable to understand the lessons from his long years of a history of oppression? What is in him that makes him continue to permit the reign and rule of the same families

in that grand scheme of things in the entire Ilocos we call political dynasty? What has made the Ilokano forget that sanut requires him to remember what wayawaya is, and that his dream of the naimbag a biag, in that hermeneutic circle, requires him to have the sanut that comprehends things, the sanut that demands of him engagement and commitment to causes that are just and fair?

There is something pathologic in that Ilokano problem. The disconnect in the metaphysical and the realities on the ground is a chasm. It is tragic. Today, for instance, there has never been a real and honest accounting of the past, of who betrayed the betrayed and who remained decent and honorable, and of who provided false illusions to enchant the Ilokanos to believe in that which is false, that which is wrong, that which is fundamentally unfair.

Of all the 196 ethnolinguistic groups of the Philippines per the 2005 count of the Ethnologue, the Ilokanos represent one of the most oppressed and abused since the end of the Spanish regime and the beginning of the American occupation. The oppression and abuse were couched with flattery: the wandering Jew, the good sakada of the American plantations of Hawaii, the model minority in diasporic communities, and the hardworking farmers in the ricefields of Mindanao, Mindoro, and Palawan. With nowhere to go but outside Ilocos, the outward migration of the Ilokanos spells both success and sorrow, triumph and tragedy, grace and grit. The exhibition of exemplary Ilokanos, some with dubious

achievements, provided veneer to the masking off of the Ilokano problem. When a people can no longer think beyond the official narrative spewed by the public relations offices of government offices and authored by government officials or their paid hacks, when elected Ilokano government officials have perfected their self-fulfilling propaganda to advance their dynastic ambitions, and when Ilokano votes carry a price tag of 500 pesos each election time—the tag rising to a thousand and seen by the hungry Ilokano in the context of how many kilos of rice they can buy with it, the Ilokano problem is real.

When we have linguistic evidence of the wisdom of the Ilokano but cannot provide direct evidence from the ground, where does *sanut* lead us? When we have linguistic evidence for that nuclear dream of freedom, where does *wayawaya* lead us? When we have linguistic evidence that the Ilokano has deeply thought about what the good life is supposed to be but that good life remains wanting, in form and substance, in the many communities of Ilokanos in the Ilocos and in the Ilokanized places, where does that *naimbag a biag* lead us?

The problem in philosophizing is when there is a disconnect between thought and reality, between claims and phenomena, and between aspirations and what happens daily. The accounts distilled in the most sublime of Ilokano thought are there, but the Ilokano today has remained as parochial as ever and able to imagine only a social world with the dynast as the head, with the feudal lord as the master, and with the

patron as the only one who can dispense the goods of public and democratic life.

All too often, we see a parade of the *mangurkuranges* and the *gagangay a tao* toward the office or house of the powerful *baknang*.¹¹ The shameless display of tarpaulins on roadsides announcing the good deeds of politicians manufactures consent from the *gagangay* and the *mangurkuranges*: the images strike recall, and during elections, with the bribe to complete the political script of approval, the dynastic Ilokano family lasts forever—their moments as lords and masters timeless, eternal, forever.

In the whole of Ilocos and Ilokanized places, the *baknang* as political lord is a constant. The *baknang* as dispenser of *sanut* and *wayawaga* is a constant. The *baknang* as promiser of the *naimbag a biag* is constant. The contradictions are a case of *aporia* here, unless the Ilokano problem is defined more properly.

In this act of philosophizing, I began from good news and ended up with a problem. The task of Ilokano philosophy is to offer a solution to this Ilokano problem. For *sanut*, while a

¹¹ In the class-oriented Ilokano society marked by power and socioeconomic status, the social divide is a version of the same divide during the Spanish, American, and Japanese regimes—three regimes that consolidated the stranglehold of the *baknang* of the *gagangay*, with the first the economically, politically, and culturally entrenched rich, and the second the everyday Ilokano, the ordinary Ilokano, the Ilokano on the street. There is someone lower than the *gagangay*, the *mangurkuranges*: the impoverished, the wretched, the miserable poor.

noun, is also a verb. For wayawaya, while a noun, is also a verb. And that dream to have a good life in naimbag a biag must be rendered a verb. Since these are all verbs, they all must find their other meanings in engaged human action.