

# philippine studies: historical and ethnographic viewpoints

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## Editor's Introduction

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# Editor's Introduction

The ethnographic method in disentangling the social construction of reality is strongly represented in this issue. In a pioneering contribution to Philippine studies based on fieldwork in rural Siquijor, Hannah Bulloch starts from the premise that personhood is culturally constructed. From this perspective she examines ordinary Catholic women's subjective interpretations of the status of the fetus as a person (*tawo*). As Bulloch puts it, her informants believe, consistent with Catholic Church teaching, that the moment of conception implies the conferral of a "soul," but personhood is not attained at that moment—in contrast to the church's position. Instead, personhood is viewed as processual: the fetus is a person-in-forma-tion that parallels its gestation. Personhood is also relational: it is inseparable from relationships between the unborn or neonate and the adult world.

These ideas of personhood are reflected but also tested in mortuary rituals in the event of pregnancy loss. Despite differences in opinion among informants, Bulloch contends that the *kalag* ("soul") of the deceased fetus—a "partial person" endowed with agency—joins the unseen world whence it can endanger the living unless appropriate funerary rituals are performed. In fact the *kalag* "is constructed as yearning to be treated as a more complete person" (214). In a liminal state, the haunting spirit of the fetus is seen as desirous of the social relationships the child could have enjoyed had it lived as a full person.

Wider implications from Bulloch's study are brought to the fore by three commentators: Fr. Jose Mario Francisco, SJ, Julius Bautista, and Mary Racelis. Francisco highlights the translation of Visayan concepts to English—particularly *kalag* and its relation to the body—and the inherently contested vocabulary of life and death, including abortion, which puts a unitary language beyond reach. But he affirms that voices, as those from Siquijor, need to be heard in open and respectful conversations on reproductive health issues. Echoing the need to consider cosmology in these conversations, Bautista seeks a refined articulation of Visayan cosmological ideas: "spiritual accompaniment," which is said to commence during conception, is distinct from "ensoulment," which for Bautista is a postpartum event in which the *kalag* infuses the newborn with *ginhawa* ("life-breath"). Also central to understanding personhood is *buot* ("will," "consciousness"), not found in Bulloch's study. Building on processual

personhood, which grants women “flexibility with regard to managing reproduction,” as Bulloch points out (217), Racelis underscores the need to understand poor women who opt for induced abortion, a decision not taken lightly. Racelis calls for a theology that is culturally responsive to the poor’s need for access to modern methods of family planning.

The Philippines is not only a sending but also a receiving state, a destination for migrants, including South Koreans displaced by the financial crisis of the late 1990s and forced to retire early. As Dohye Kim explains in her ethnography, these retirees found the Philippines affordable and attractive, boosted by a 2006 South Korean television portrayal of a couple’s luxurious retirement in Baguio City. But their increasing presence has led to tensions with Filipinos, which Kim says are fueled by historically constructed notions of intra-Asian racism in both nations. South Koreans take pride in their country’s economy, propelled, they believe, by their ethic of “self-help,” which translates to the denigration of the Philippines—where they nonetheless recover their economic and emotional losses, enabling them to enjoy a lifestyle they could not afford at home. Abetted by their lack of English proficiency, they opt for social isolation, widening the gulf with Filipinos who frame the South Korean presence as an “invasion.”

Raul Pertierra’s commentary explores the phenomenal rise of television actors Alden Richards and Maine Mendoza, the pair known as AlDub, in the neighborhood segment of the noontime show *Eat Bulaga*. Pertierra asserts that silliness, for which *Eat Bulaga* is known, must be taken seriously for they point to hierarchies that are thereby loosened. Yet, the spontaneity in *Eat Bulaga* and especially in AlDub is skin-deep, for behind it lie orchestrated emotional labor and the embedment of popular culture in material practices. Fandom and patronage politics are linked, Pertierra argues, just as entertainment and politics are both technologically mediated and require rigorous ethnography.

In a professorial address that treads the comparative path, Mark Thompson confronts elite skepticism of the poor, who are constructed as needing voter education for behaving electorally in ways subversive of elite interests. Thompson argues that the poor’s moral economy had propelled populist politicians to power: Thaksin Shinawatra in Thailand and Joseph Estrada in the Philippines. But in both cases the adverse reactions of powerful groups eventuated in their downfall. Still, Thompson argues, our notions about poor voters need to be revised beyond a simplistic and individualistic notion of “money politics.”

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