Benevolent Altruism or Ordinary Reciprocity? A Response to Austin’s View of the Mindanao Hinterland

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In Human Organization 54(1), criminologist Timothy Austin explores aspects of “Philippine culture and personality” which he claims facilitate the local maintenance of peace and order. Specifically, he discusses some “cultural patterns” and “behavioral features” (1995:14) which he believes “underlie fundamental patterns of altruism” (1995:10) that foster the formation of “self-help” security strategies. “Self-help” in this case refers to volunteer citizens’ organizations and strategies that provide security at the village level and have a great impact in remote rural areas where government-provided security is often inadequate.

Although altruistic cultural and personality patterns are not the focus of Austin’s article, they form the entire foundation for his larger arguments regarding social control within the Philippine context. He looks at “several traditional ways Filipino culture, personality, and situational patterns provide a stage-setting for the emergence of voluntarism and altruistic convictions,” and explores “self-help” groups as “an extension of benevolent principles” (1995:16).

Austin’s definition of altruism, however, is never made explicit. At most, he refers to “self-sacrifice” and “surrendering personal appetites for the hunger of others” (1995:18, note 5). Altruism is used throughout in reference to actions undertaken for the sole benefit of another, with no concern for reciprocation and sometimes bringing disadvantage to the benefactor (1995:14).

My response is limited to evaluating Austin’s assertion of altruism with regard to the Philippine cultural traditions he describes. First, I am compelled to criticize his concept of “Philippine culture”. Next, I discuss the important role of reciprocity in certain practices, showing that Austin’s own descriptions contradict his assertions of altruism. Finally, I conclude with some general thoughts on the “self-help” or volunteer security organizations with which Austin is principally concerned.

Philippine Life Ways

Austin uses the terms “Philippine culture” and “Filipinos” in a misleading way, implying a cultural homogeneity that does not exist. He does this by neglecting several important areas of social differentiation: ethnic, geographic, religious, economic, and linguistic, rendering his descriptions and analysis anthropologically dubious. There are many examples that illustrate this problem.

For example, the focus of his article is Mindanao, an island occupied by Christian migrants from various Visayan and other groups to the north, a large minority of indigenous Muslims, and a considerable population (over two million) of non-Muslim indigenous groups or lâmad. Most residents of Mindanao are certainly aware of the major linguistic and cultural differences between and within such groups. In fact, Mindanao may be the most diverse region in a fantastically diverse country, and its cultural, political, and economic situation is radically different from that of Luzon or even the nearby Visayan islands. But Austin is unconcerned about using data from Nueva Ecija (1995:11) in presenting a “view from the Mindanao hinterland”, even though these data have been gathered in a completely different context: Nueva Ecija is a province on the island of Luzon, almost five hundred miles to the north with no notable Muslim or lâmad population, a very different set of languages, a different political climate, and a separate local economy.

Perhaps by “Filipino” Austin is referring only to the overwhelming majority of Filipinos who are Christian, but even this would be problematic. Visayan Christians, for example, make distinctions among themselves according to the Visayan language they speak, be it Cebuano, Ilonggo, or others. More importantly, Visayans tend to consider themselves quite different from the more northern Christian groups such as Tagalogs, Ilocanos, and Bicolanos. In addition to linguistic and cultural distinctions, Christian Filipinos make two more distinctions among themselves: religion and economic class. In the case of religion, Filipinos see a major difference not only between Catholics and Protestants but also between various denominations and sects. Regarding economic class, the Philippines is a highly stratified society—a point glaringly apparent even to tourists. That more than half of the population lives below the poverty level is certainly significant to any analysis of Philippine society.

I am puzzled because Austin refers to “religious conflicts” between Muslims and Christians throughout his article, indicating the presence of at least one basis of differentiation. He also notes the existence of status hierarchies (1995:13) and hints at the impact of economic differences (1995:12, 16) which enable affluent people to play leadership roles while constraining others to subordination. For example, he notes that, because of material requirements, membership in certain volunteer security networks “excludes all but the relatively affluent” (1995:16). Yet Austin considers none of these in his analysis, treating the Philippines as an undifferentiated society, implying a homogeneous “personality” for an incredibly diverse set of peoples. To which kind of Filipino is he referring?

Austin is also lax in his treatment of Philippine languages. Contrary to his use of the term, “Visayan” is not a language per se, but refers to a large collection of languages and people. The language he refers to as “Visayan” is probably Cebuano, the lingua franca of northern Mindanao. Perhaps he was confused, because people in northern Mindanao tend to refer to Cebuano as “Bisaya”. But if one travels elsewhere in the Visayas and Mindanao and speaks to locals of “Bisaya”, even illiterate and unschooled peasants or fisherfolk will feel compelled to ask, “Do you mean Cebuano?”

Austin also throws in some Tagalog words with his “Visayan” (1995:14). Tagalog, spoken mainly in Southern Luzon, is commonly referred to as Pilipino, the “national” language. He uses the Tagalog terms kaya (“shame”) and
pakisana ("camaraderie"), which in Cebuano would be kalitaw, and hag-on-hagon or panaayayogay, respectively. This point may have seemed minor to Austin, considering the propensity in the Philippines to refer to the native languages as "dialects". However, Cebuano and Tagalog are not linguistically interchangeable or even in the same immediate language family. In fact, for some Cebuano speakers, their language has become a focus for resisting cultural impositions from the north.

Finally, Austin's reference to the described field site as the "Mindanao hinterland" is also misleading. Iligan City and the readily accessible rural areas nearby (1995:11) hardly constitute a hinterland by Philippine standards. There are definitely isolated communities in Mindanao accessible only by hiking or riding four-wheel drive vehicles on difficult dirt roads. Sometimes there is bus or jeepney service from the nearest lowland town but only if the road is maintained and never during the rainy season. However, that would take several hours of travel — not "a jeep ride of only a few minutes" (1995:11) — from a major city like Iligan. Perhaps Austin considers the island of Mindanao itself a "hinterland".

CULTURE AND PERSONALITY

Austin describes a few "traditional patterns" which he calls familism, friendships, status obligations, and cooperative schemes. Each of these traditions, he says, "pertains to a mood of altruism that gives rise to self-help activities aimed at protecting the immediate family" (1995:12). Austin also describes certain behaviors as manifestations of a fundamental altruism. He explores all these as "natural and selfless responses to maintain harmony and close neighborhood ties" (1995:16). However, even by Austin's descriptions, these traditions are more indicative of reciprocity rather than altruism.

Reciprocity is used here to refer to various forms of exchange that may differ with regard to immediacy, equivalence, and other variables that stipulate returns (Sahlins 1972:183-275). These exchanges form a continuum, ranging from open-ended assistance to cases of strict equivalence. The obligation to reciprocate may be vague and indefinite (i.e., weak reciprocity), or it may be immediate, involving items of "commensurate worth or utility" (i.e., balanced reciprocity) (1972:193-195). Exchanges may also be part of a system of "pooling" or redistribution of resources within a household, kin group, or community (1972:188-189).

Unless otherwise indicated, my comments and examples are based on attitudes and practices I have observed over many years among various economic classes of Cebuano-speaking Catholic and Protestant Filipinos in northern Mindanao.

Familism

Austin tells us that "Filipinos adhere to a rigid code of filial piety" (1995:12), since "a number of married or unmarried children remain attached to a large family unit until the age of 30" (1995:12). Even among adult children who leave the immediate household, most choose to remain in the vicinity. He also gives examples of siblings defending family property and each other, notably with both cases involving the use of firearms. He says of one example: "No questions were ever asked by the assisting brothers, who simply appeared to react in a reflex manner" (1995:12). To Austin, this constitutes "devotion" between family members, something he claims "is especially noticeable in the Philippines" (1995:12).

His intention is to prove that "a by-product of such family cohesion is increased security against intruders" (1995:12). However, his label of a "rigid code of filial piety" is inappropriate, and the accompanying description ultimately portrays Filipinos as automatically and mindlessly driven by obedience to kin ties to perform acts of no selfish benefit, i.e., "altruism", a portrayal inaccurate both in the abstract and in everyday reality.

The instances of family "cohesion" he describes can easily be the result of necessary interdependence among household members and kin groups, brought about by such factors as limited economic resources and a hostile political environment. Land in the Philippine archipelago, for example, is scarce enough to inhibit the growth of independent and single-occupant households, especially among the rural and urban poor. And a household which pools its members' resources such as labor and cash income yields important benefits for individual members who may find it otherwise difficult or impossible to survive on their own. Children also stand to benefit by protecting their parents' property and other resources, whether immediately as household members or later in the form of individual inheritance.

Other common practices not mentioned by Austin can be considered altruistic. For example, it is not unusual for older children in poor families to sacrifice personal goals (e.g., education) and engage in wage labor in order to support younger siblings (e.g., by paying for their education). However, it can also be argued that even the above practice involves reciprocity because these younger siblings may also be expected to support their parents and older siblings (e.g., through the better incomes that may result from higher education).

In truth, support of one's kin is not as remarkable as Austin suggests. Kin interdependence has been repeatedly documented throughout the world, and the Philippine varieties are not unique. Nor can they be appropriately characterized as simply the result of devotion or altruistic principles, since self-interest and reciprocity are always features of "familism." Certainly, Filipinos will agree that kin ties play a large role in their lives, but they are also individuals who think for themselves, perhaps often deciding that support of familial interests is to their own advantage.

Friendships

Austin discusses the compadre/conadre system of obligatory relationships, also known as compadrazgo. This system extends fictive kinship to otherwise unrelated people by choosing them as sponsors or "godparents" for important rituals like weddings and baptisms. According to Austin, it is a matter of friends "bonding an already existing friendship with religious sanction" (1995:13) He says that though such relationships may sometimes bring economic assistance, it is essentially about friends who spend time together and are united by a bond which is "immediately apparent" (1995:13). Compadres are significant as "additional associates who could reliably be called upon for assistance in any variety of family matters or problems including security" (1995:13). On an individual level, this means a larger circle of protection than the family.

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While Austin’s description is certainly true, it is very incomplete and in some sense misleading. For example, it is just atypical for people to disregard intimate friends and choose more affluent, influential, or otherwise higher status men and women as compadres and compadres, respectively. They may be seeking such compadres to increase their own status (i.e., social climbing), or to form a political or economic safety net by strengthening ties with individuals from whom they can exact important benefits, such as jobs or loans. People of higher status might consent in order to increase their own social wealth and widen their circle of influence (i.e., sakop, discussed below). Also, compadres and compadres are sometimes no more than casual acquaintances, perhaps one’s boss or a local government official, with whom one does not necessarily maintain daily contact, even after the baptism or wedding they sponsored.

On the other hand, good friends or constant companions may refer to each other by compadrazgo terms even if neither are godparents of each other’s children, whether at baptism or time of marriage. Moreover, new acquaintances and perfect strangers can be heard calling each other p’re (described by Austin as an abbreviation of compadre, 1995:13), akin to the casual way “buddy”, “brother”, and “friend” are sometimes used in the United States. This use of p’re, however, might be more common among men in Tagalog-speaking areas. Cebuano-speaking men are more likely to use the slang term hai.

The different aspects of compadrazgo that both Austin and I have described do not strongly support the idea of an underlying altruism. In fact, the phrase “system of obligatory relationships” itself implies reciprocity more than self-sacrifice in the name of friendship.

Status Obligations

Austin’s paragraphs on “status obligations” describe a network of “duty-bound subordinates” called the sakop (1995:13). A sakop network relies on hierarchies of status or prestige (e.g., in the workplace) in which subordinates are at the “beck and call” of higher-status individuals (1995:13). For example, one who “heads” his own sakop can himself be part of a higher status person’s sakop, and so on. This describes a larger security network which goes beyond both the family and friendships.

His description is problematic because it is simply incomplete. The gaps in his description may lead some readers to believe that the sakop is an automatic result of differences in status or prestige, especially when taken with Austin’s references to feudalism, and statements like: “Persons below one in the workplace are obliged to assist those higher in the status hierarchy” (1995:13). Therefore, it is important to emphasize that simply being a subordinate does not necessarily make one “duty-bound” to provide assistance in any context.

Austin later tells us that some respondents “suggested that sakop now pertains to all persons... considered as allies and with whom one would expect reciprocal obligations” (1995:13, emphasis added). This is a more accurate description of the sakop in practice today, and it is also closest to historical practice among limad groups in Mindanao (e.g., Biernatzi 1973). Recognizing the role of reciprocity within the sakop is significant because like any alliance, a sakop network would need greater reinforcement than a simple status inequality, perhaps in the form of social, political, or economic benefits, which in turn would promote utang kabubut-ón [discussed below]. Also, despite a reciprocal relationship having been cultivated, it is not unknown for subordinates to change sides, especially if the wealth or power of the sakop “head” diminishes or is no longer advantageous.

In fact, Austin provides us no compelling reason, cultural or otherwise, for an individual to feel obligated to assist someone simply because they are of higher status. To remove a significant factor like reciprocity from a description of sakop mistakenly portrays Filipino “status obligations” as one-sided and practically altruistic. Of course, an alternative to reciprocity might be threats or the use of force to compel or obligate subordinates, but I hesitate to apply the term sakop to such a relationship.

Cooperative Schemes

Austin describes neighborhood cooperation as further example of altruism in a Filipino cultural tradition, this time “at the level of community organization” (1995:13). He writes that his respondents were “well aware of their responsibility to aid neighbors” (1995:13), a phrase which again implies altruism. This time, however, he notes “the persistent dependence upon neighbors common in rural and agricultural environments” (1995:18) and talks about the practice of hunglos (making loans), a form of labor exchange. He even says hunglos was a necessity between rice farmers who would otherwise be unable to complete their tasks on their own (1995:13). These are, again, clear examples of reciprocal relationships, inadvertently disproving his own argument.

In addition, though neighborhood cooperation may be touted as a native “tradition” in textbooks about national “characteristics” and “values”, I would argue that, in practice, it is limited to those for whom it is a necessity. Filipinos employed in the commerce sector, for example, will not have the same need as peasant farmers to share tasks. And affluent Filipinos who feel any responsibility to aid their lower status neighbors are more likely to consider it an act of charity than “neighborhood cooperation”.

Personality

Finally, Austin speaks of three “complex moral imperatives” which persist in the Philippines. Their underlying altruism, he believes, “clearly provide a behavioral foundation upon which more structured self-help security networks may be launched” (1995:14). These are utang kabubut-ón (debt of gratitude), pakikisama (“camaraderie”), and kuyâ (“face”). He describes pakikisama in particular as being fundamentally altruistic because it involves remaining agreeable even at the expense of one’s interests or preferences (1995:14). Austin also claims that “such value orientations are not consciously pondered” (1995:14).

The above values are known throughout the Philippines. However, I take issue with Austin’s position that they are unconscious and purely altruistic. I return to the arguments made above that Austin’s incomplete descriptions lead him to ignore the actual self-interest that these “patterns” and “values” hold. And again he contradicts himself even by his own descriptions. Speaking of utang kabubut-ón, he refers to a “system of reciprocal obligations” but later states that it is “not consciously
pursued" (1995:14, emphases added). Then, on the very same page, he writes of community members who "may oppose such a pattern of mutual obligation," and quotes a woman remarking to her children: "[D]o not take any gifts or favors from anyone; we do not want to have an itung kabubut-ôn with them" (1995:14, emphasis added). That such values are consciously pondered is certainly apparent in the immediate quote. That the above values involve reciprocity rather than altruism is also self-evident, as it is in Austin's discussion of the concept of hiya or shame:

"one will be shamed (lose face)...should an obligatory debt go unreciprocated (should one fail to assist another who has previously rendered assistance)" (1995:14, emphases added).

Austin defines pakikisama as "the desire to avoid placing others in stressful or unpleasant situations" (1995:14) which is manifested in the tendency to "go along", even if it involves "something potentially disagreeable or even dangerous" (1995:14). This is certainly true, but by separating pakikisama from the context of reciprocal obligations, we are misled into perceiving it as altruistic. In practice, pakikisama may involve "going along" because one is obligated to the person making the request, e.g. through kabubut-ôn, sakop, or other ways. It may also involve verbally agreeing to someone's unpalatable request or misguided opinion in order to avoid conflict or offense, while subsequently avoiding that person and effectively getting out of the aforementioned verbal agreement. In practice, pakikisama is more a matter of etiquette related to the avoidance of confrontation or embarrassment, which would be improper or very rude in most contexts.

Austin also states that pakikisama is a "benevolent trait...undoubtedly accentuated...by the 400 years of monastic conditioning by the Spanish Catholics" (1995:14). He footnotes: "the presumption that strict adherence to Catholic, or other pious creeds, would expectedly lead to pakikisama appears a logical conclusion...[T]he Protestant conviction would hold that... surrendering personal appetites for the hunger of others...[i.e.] 'self-sacrifice'...[finds] its purest expression in Christ" (1995:18, note 5). The argument for pakikisama as benevolent and altruistic is blatant, but again it is completely misleading.

First of all, such values are consciously addressed and negotiated, not "unconscious" as Austin claims. These values are openly discussed in social settings and are often cited when criticizing anti-social behavior. Second, it is remarkable that Austin portrays the Philippines as country of pious pushovers in light of the fact that prolonged political and religious uprisings have been constant of Philippine history from the time Lapulapu, a Visayan, killed Ferdinand Magellan after the Spanish arrived in 1521 and claimed the islands in the name of God.

PEACEMAKING STRATEGIES?

Some final remarks are due regarding some of the "self-help" and "peacemaking" strategies Austin focuses on. Having already illustrated my concern regarding his misleading portrayal of "Filipino culture," I am equally concerned by the subsequent characterization of community-level security organizations in the Philippines as "altruistic." Such a serious misunderstanding leads Austin to ignore the practices of many of these "self-help" units that are supposed to protect local communities from "unruly outsiders" (1995:15).

In discussing sakop, for example, he mentions that this network can "represent a private security reserve associated with an individual in the community" (1995:13). Perhaps Austin is unaware that this can and does take the form of fully-armed private armies loyal to powerful individuals. This is now illegal in the Philippines, but persists because of the influence of particular high-status individuals and the inadequacy of government response. Such private armies primarily serve as bodyguards but have also been known to harass, assault, and sometimes murder private citizens. This serves only the interests of certain elites and does not protect the security of the community as a whole.

Austin also discusses government-sponsored citizens' groups, such as the Civilian Home Defense Force (CHDF), who were later replaced by Civilian Armed Forces Geographical Units (CAFGU) (1995:15-18). The function of these groups was to serve as local military auxiliaries, mainly to support government counter-insurgency efforts against the communist New People's Army (NPA) and other political extremists. The only hint of controversy is when Austin writes: "Although the CHDF was quite popular...It occasionally operated as a...violence-prone vigilante force and caused some embarrassment at the national level" (1995:16). Unfortunately, as the next commentary points out, the CHDFs and CAGFUs have caused more than occasional "embarrassment" at the local level. While I have met CAFGU members who are honorable and law-abiding citizens, there is good reason for cynicism when Austin refers to their work in general as either "peacekeeping", "altruistic", or an "extension of benevolent principles".

I wish to reiterate that these "traditions" and "values" must be understood in context and in practice. Otherwise, important social, political, and economic information is overlooked or misinterpreted, affecting the accuracy of any analysis. This is a weakness in Austin's field studies.

All the points discussed above may seem minor if taken separately, but in total they draw Austin's descriptions and analysis into question. Austin is not trying to test any hypotheses or criminological theories (1995:17), only to describe what he views as an indigenous basis [i.e., traditions of "altruism"] for the foundation of "self-help" organizations. But judging from his own descriptions, Austin appears to be seriously misinformed about the contexts in which such traditions and organizations may operate.

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