

philippine studies: historical and ethnographic viewpoints

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Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints
vol. 64 no. 2 (2016): 227–30

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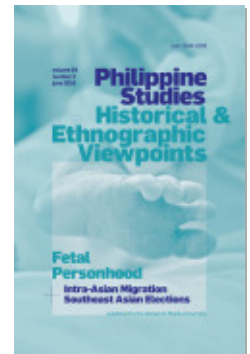
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Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints, Volume 64,
Number 2, June 2016, pp. 227-230 (Article)

Published by Ateneo de Manila University
DOI: [10.1353/phs.2016.0022](https://doi.org/10.1353/phs.2016.0022)



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When One's Birthday Opens Up a Cosmological Pandora's Box

The common way of inquiring about someone's birthday in Binisaya is to ask, *kanus-a ka na tawo?*—literally, when did you become a person? It is an intriguing feature of the Visayan worldview, one that may well be rooted in an ancient cosmological order, that the quintessential stage of one's personhood is intuitively located not at conception but at the point in which we emerge into the world, when we take our first breath and attain an independent physical viability.

The notion that personhood is emplaced upon birth does have serious social and even political implications, particularly in the Philippines, where the debates about the recently passed Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health (RH) Law have been dominated by issues of sexual morality, theology, abortion, and the link between demography and economic development. Yet, why is it that cosmological beliefs about personhood have not been considered a source of crucial insight into these discussions, even though such beliefs are important to the majority of those who are the most affected by the RH Law's ramifications?

This problematic remained in my mind as I considered Hannah Bulloch's (2016) wonderful article, which is an attempt to grasp Visayan cosmological notions of fetal personhood in a manner that is well grounded in her observations of the practice of everyday life in Siquijor. It is refreshing and timely to read an ethnographically robust analysis that, at the very least, encourages us to take cosmology seriously in our discussions about such crucial legal and political issues. I agree with Bulloch's central argument that, from a Binisaya perspective, personhood is processual and that having a "soul" is seen as a necessary but not sufficient condition for being a person. But I would suggest, further, that if we are to really take cosmology seriously, we have a responsibility to cultivate a finely tuned and nuanced sense of the supernatural entities that condition what a person is from a Binisaya perspective, as well as the extended spectrum of the process of personhood.

With this in mind I offer what I hope could serve as an addendum to Bulloch's interpretation of the ethnographic data. I suggest that, in addition

to the two stages of personhood discussed in her analysis, namely, *spiritual accompaniment* and *ensoulment*, there must be a much stronger emphasis on a third—that is, on one’s development of consciousness and will, *buot*, which is an equally crucial, discernible stage in the process of personhood.

Resil B. Mojares (1997, 44) once wrote that personhood is not simply a matter of biology but of cosmology, and therefore it is important to grasp a Visayan worldview that conceives of everyday life as populated by a “surplus of souls.” A serious consideration of this cosmological order, particularly as it pertains to developmental personhood, prompts us to be cognizant of the distinction between at least two kinds of supernatural presences.

Firstly, an embryo’s entry into the world is preceded by a state of *spiritual accompaniment* in which a gestating fetus develops in tandem with what is known in Binisaya as an *umalagad*—literally a companion or cohort that advocates for and protects the unborn as it starts to gain substantive, discernibly human physical form. An *umalagad* is an entity that does not ensoul the fetus per se, much less consummate its “full” personhood. Bulloch never mentions *umalagad*. But I do not think that she would disagree with this point. Bulloch (2016, 218 n. 5) conveys what her knowledge collaborators describe as *kauban* in pointing out “a view of the soul as accompanying a person but not necessarily being the essence of them.”

Where things become interesting pertains to the stage in which a spiritual entity ensouls—or I would suggest a better word, “enflames”—the unborn, just as it emerges from the female’s womb. The *living* soul, that is, the one that animates the body of the unborn, is correctly identified in the article as *kalag*, literally, a flame. The crucial thing that should be specified, however, is that *kalag* infuses a newborn with *ginhawa*, a “life-breath,” *only upon which* a baby attains a state of being a person and at which point it can be said to have been *natawhan* (literally, to be “empersoned”).

Drawing upon a more conceptually precise notion of *ginhawa* and *natawhan* leads me to have some hesitations about Bulloch’s (ibid., 215) claims that “ensoulment happens at conception.” She suggests that even unborn or miscarried fetuses (that is, those who do not or no longer have *ginhawa*) are ensouled with *kalag*, with statements like “*kalag* of a child that has died at a pre- or perinatal stage” or “souls of the miscarried” (ibid., 213). *Kalag*, to be more precise, is concerned with a person’s life only *after birth*, only after a baby has become *natawhan*, and has already become infused with *ginhawa*. I believe that Bulloch’s article would probably benefit from a

more nuanced distinction between *umalagad* and *kalag* in a way that takes greater consideration of the latter's spiritual function.

"[I]t is likely," argues Bulloch (*ibid.*, 215), "that in practice relational personhood continues to develop in 'fullness' such as with birth, feeding, socializing, and so forth." With this notion, I agree, and would suggest that the discussion should be channeled toward examining the process by which a newborn who has become *natawhan* develops a consciousness of its being-in-the-world, or its *buot*. The forming of *buot* is only hinted at in Bulloch's article.

Like its counterparts *loob* (in Tagalog) and *nakem* (in Ilocano), any discussion of *buot* must always begin with an acknowledgment of its conceptual elasticity. Spanish dictionaries such as that of Mateo Sanchez (1611/1722) provide a basic definition of *buot* as "will" or "volition." Leonardo Mercado (1972, 582–83) defines it as "consciousness, consciences, awareness, degree of intelligence," "thoughts, mind, reason," or "consciousness." Beyond that, Mercado (*ibid.*, 590) defines it as an attribute possessed by a person who is "morally good, conscientious" such that someone who is kind is *buotan* ("endowed with *buot*"). Conversely, to be without *buot* (*walay buot*) is to be "innocent" when applied to children or "irresponsible" when applied to adults. The linguistic derivatives of *buot* testify to its relationship to consciousness: *kalibutan* ("world," or consciousness of the world) and *palibut* ("surroundings") pertain not only to ethical volition but to phenomenological being-in-the-world, such that someone who is ignorant or has "no clue" is *walay kalibutan*. The development of personhood, therefore, continues into the early stages of infancy, in which a baby's body, having been "enflamed" with *ginhawa*, gradually attains *buot*, whereupon it can be said that the infant is completely a person.

In fairness to Bulloch, her article is only concerned with fetal personhood, and a discussion of *buot* might fall outside of the analytical parameters that she has set. Nevertheless, if we are truly serious about considering cosmology as an important facet in the determination of fetal personhood, questions about *buot* must necessarily enter the frame. Bulloch's discussion is valuable because it inevitably opens up the proverbial Pandora's box, which I would characterize by channeling some confronting moral and legal issues that I have encountered during my own fieldwork in Cebu: Why worry about abortion when a fetus has not yet been inflamed by *kalag*? What are our responsibilities to children who are *walay buot*, *walay kalibutan*? These

issues do not detract from what is a well-conceived ethnographic piece that should contribute toward a more progressive discourse about personhood.

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MARY RACELIS

Siquijodnon Voices Speak to the Philippine Church: Rethinking Personhood in Culture

Anthropologist Hannah C. M. Bulloch’s (2016) ethnographic account of the Siquijodnon understanding of when a fetus becomes a person adds significant new elements to the long-debated reproductive health (RH) question, when does life begin? Her research reveals that the women of Siquijor see personhood as evolving through a gradual process of bodily formation during pregnancy. Respondents affirm that the soul is infused at conception, while personhood “is made” gradually over time into a social being endowed with a capacity to live a life. In their view, ensoulment is important but not sufficient to produce a person. This *processual* understanding of the fetus’s personhood diverges significantly from the Catholic Church’s view of conception as the fixed, one-time moment when *both* ensoulment and personhood take place.