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AUTHOR(S):

Soon, Chuan Yean

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Hidden Transcripts from “Below” in Rural Politics of the Philippines: Interpreting the Janus-facedness of Patron-Client Ties and *Tulong* (Help)

Soon Chuan Yean*

This paper argues that ordinary people often contest rather than submit to the powerful elites to gain material interests and political favoritism. Ordinary people are both shrewd and critical in making judgments and evaluations on politicians as well as the (unequal) relation of powers. Based on fieldwork interviews in the Philippines, this paper identifies the perception of (local) politics from ordinary people’s point of view in a seemingly mundane political environment. If the political economic imperative of *tulong*, or help, is decoded to include its social meanings, functions, and cultural connotation, it reveals the Janus-facedness of patron-client ties that allows for a negotiation of power relations between clients and patrons.

Keywords: Janus-facedness, local politics, ordinary people, patron-client ties, Tanauan City, *tulong*

Introduction

A review of Philippine political studies reveals the researchers’ emphasis on the role of the powerful gentry—political and economic elites—and silencing of the powerless people’s voices to understand the structure of Philippine politics. The bases of the arguments emanate from facets of Philippine political culture such as kinship relations, *compadre* (godparents)-ism, *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude), *hiya* (shame), and *walang hiya* (shameless), functioning under the rubric of patron-client ties (Agpalo 1969; Lande 1965; Hollnsteiner 1963), which allows for a hierarchical arrangement between the elites and the masses.¹⁾ According to traditional arguments, elites retain control over political offices and the economy, while the masses are passive, submissive, and dependent on their patrons. Hence, the elites dominate political change and development while the masses—either susceptible to material inducement or subscribing to guns, goons, and gold—are mere followers, inarticulate in political contestation.

* 孫傳煙, School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800 Penang, Malaysia
e-mail: chuanyean@usm.my

1) “Ordinary people,” “masses,” “the poor,” and “subordinates” will be used interchangeably in this paper.

This paper argues that the masses are indeed critical and do contest for social claims. The analysis of election results (electoral politics, political affiliations), relationships between patrons and clients through formal institutions (political factions, machine politics), or the political culture that ties two parties may not suffice to grasp how the masses “do” politics. This paper asserts that there are essential political features that require researchers to excavate the taken-for-granted political modalities and locate the “hidden” transcript (Scott 1990) of the masses outside the realm of formal political structures.

Furthermore, patron-client ties in rural areas are Janus-faced. To the rural folks, on one hand *pulitika* (loosely translated as “politics”) is “dirty”: patron-client ties function mostly during elections for manipulations such as vote-buying and -selling, and patron-client relations serve both actors’ vested interests. On the other hand, the masses do articulate responsible leadership, social justice, development, and so on. This latter discourse of “good” politics does not manifest in the realm of formal politics but is “hidden” in the realm of everyday politics.

A sociocultural and socio-political analysis on *tulong*, or help, may be a useful way to understand how and why the masses subscribe to patron-client ties and engage or challenge a set of “rules of conduct” in their own community. The concept of *tulong* is discussed because of its constant usage throughout the interviews. Even though there is no consistency or inclusive usage of “*tulong*” across all the interviews, the term’s nuances have somehow manifested in other social practices such as *magandang loob* (good inner being) in the realm of everyday politics.

This paper starts by clarifying several concepts and then outlines studies on Philippine politics, focusing on patron-client relations. Most political studies on the Philippines use the patron-client framework as a useful and convenient model to understand political changes and structures. From here, I identify two distinct groups of scholars. One advocates the patron-client framework as the building block of Philippine politics and then expands the framework to include the patrimonial character of the Philippine state, its “imperfect” democratization process, and its weak institutions. The other group of scholars critically disengages from the patron-client framework and uses more cultural, linguistic, sociological, and anthropological approaches to locate other political features in Philippine society. Following the second group of approaches, this paper will showcase other political mechanisms that are at work in a rural setup.

Clarification of Concepts

This research is a study of local people’s political perceptions. “Local” here means that

the main focus of the research is at the micro level—personal experiences, personal memories, fragmented actions within particular contexts. (This is the reason the paper gives paramount attention to the interviews as primary data.) In a limited sense, this paper takes the localization of knowledge as a way to understand the construction of politics using a bottom-up approach. This paper follows Benedict Kerkvliet’s (1991; 1995) definition of politics as everyday politics: “unorganized and informal discourse and activity of everyday politics where people come to terms with and/or contest norms and rules regarding authority, production, and the allocation of resources” (Kerkvliet 1995, 418). Kerkvliet argues that the patron-client framework is not sufficient to understand Philippine political structures. His own research in Nueva Ecija indicates that subordinated villagers are antagonistic toward their patrons—not in open confrontation but often in an “indirect, non-confrontational, and hidden” way (*ibid.*). Following Kerkvliet’s approach, this research introduces another possible framework for understanding clients’ political discourse by articulating the concept of *tulong* as a hidden transcript of the poor to claim for moral politics.

“Moral” here refers to an idea, i.e., *tulong*—or, to borrow Kerkvliet’s words, “rule of conduct” (Kerkvliet 1991, 10)—that is familiar to the people. In his study of peasant politics in Malaysia James C. Scott (1985) differentiates *tolong*, or help, into several categories to remind readers of the hidden transcript of peasants when receiving assistance from landlords. Scott argues that *tolong* entails the reciprocity of the provider with the receiver and vice versa. If *tolong* turns into *sedekah* (alms), then the receiver forever becomes a debtor to the giver. This is different from *zakat* (an Islamic taxation practice), which is a form of rights. Many peasants, as far as possible, avoid receiving *tolong* as alms in order to escape being in the debtor position in the hierarchy of patron-client relations. As will be indicated below, *tulong* that functions in patron-client relations is Janus-faced: on one hand, the realm of formal politics (election campaigns) entails “dirty” politics; on the other hand, in the realm of everyday politics *tulong* that encompasses *loob* (inner being) is acceptable and is to be preserved and manifested. *Loob* shifts its validities from time to time in different contexts; it is not static or unbounded; and it is micro-oriented. In sum, “morality” as referred to in this paper embeds the nuance of compatibility of *loob* between the patron and the client, an internal equilibrium of a sort.

Accentuation of *Tulong*: Public Sphere, Culture, and “Soul Stuff”

Sociologically speaking, *tulong* is a functional social practice that exists anywhere and at any time and involves more than one individual to perform. In the *barangays* (loosely

translated as villages) in which this researcher resided, it was an exchange practice in a variety of social contexts such as funerals, weddings, elections, voluntary work, payment of hospital bills, religious ceremonies, and many more situations. The political modality of *tulong* cannot be taken exclusively as the political culture of the masses, nor does *tulong* serve as a political ideology for the masses to engage in a social movement for revolt. The tricky question that arises is, how does *tulong* as a social function in a *barangay* become a political discourse among the poor? To answer this, we need to categorize *tulong* as a sort of cultural system.

Studying political discourse in the cultural domain “entails probing the social meanings of the languages used by ordinary people, their cultural practices, their social symbols and ideas, and their religiosity” (Soon 2008). Stuart Hall (1997) indicates that culture serves as a system of representation that produces meaning. Such meaning is understood, constructed, and sometimes shared by different social classes of people in different public spheres through language to express thoughts and feelings or emotions (Kusaka 2009).

In the rural setup in Barangay Angeles,²⁾ *tulong* as a cultural system is taken as a “submission” by clients to patrons; the latter are seen as “men of prowess.” This is akin to O.W. Wolters’s (1999) definition of “men of prowess” as possessing the cultural element of “soul stuff” that attracts followers. Wolters’s definition of “soul stuff” includes the qualities of the leader that represent his high level of spiritual development and thus capacity for leadership. A “man of prowess” needs to constantly project this “soul stuff” to his followers so that the latter can recognize his spiritual endowment and then participate in it. The recognition of a man of prowess comes about “not only because his

2) Barangay Angeles (Note: This is a pseudonym for the *barangay*, to protect the privacy of residents) is 9 kilometers from Tanauan City (*poblacion* area). Originally, Angeles was part of the bigger Barangay Janopol, but in 1964 the latter was divided into two other *barangays*, resulting in three *barangays*: Barangay Janopol Oriental, Occidental, and Angeles. The population of Barangay Angeles is 1,853, consisting of 966 males and 887 females. They are gathered into 390 households with a total of 325 houses built; 264 households are *Katoliko* (Catholic), and 31 are Born Again (Christians).

The socioeconomic landscape of Angeles can be categorized into two major parts. Purok (pre-cincts) I to VI is considered to be a relatively well-to-do residential area, while Purok VII is a relatively poor area. However, this does not mean that Angeles is a *barangay* full of landowners, big businesspeople, or the like. On the contrary, the majority of *barangay* folks in Angeles are poor. The majority of households have at least one person in the family working abroad as an OFW (Overseas Filipino Worker): either as a domestic helper or as a seaman. Others are farmers or fishermen, though the majority of the younger generations, especially females, work in a factory after graduating from high school. There are two types of residents: the Tagalogs and the Bicolanos. The former are those who were born in Tanauan City, while the latter are those who migrated from the Bicol region and married locals. (In Tanauan City Tagalogs comprise 113,438 or 97.18 per cent of residents, while Bicolanos comprise 1,272 or 1.09 per cent.)

entourage could expect to enjoy material rewards but also . . . because their own spiritual substance, for everyone possessed it in some measure, would participate in his, thereby leading to rapport and personal satisfaction” (*ibid.*, 19).

Quite similar to Wolters’s analysis of men of prowess and the spiritual (not just material) relationship they build with their followers, this paper will indicate that ordinary people in the *barangay* can—and do—view *tulong* from the politicians as some kind of “spiritual merit” coming from the *loob*. In other words, clients seek an equal status with their patrons, a quest that is manifested in the feeling (i.e., good inner being or *magandang loob*) that the latter are consistently exercising respect and justice when providing *tulong* to the needy. This enables clients to reconstruct relations of hierarchy into a more equalized customary relationship. People’s “submission” to become part of the elite’s “entourage” can be traced to their understanding of “soul stuff,” which in the context of *tulong* in the Tagalog language is analogous to the power built up in the *loob*.

That is to say, viewed from the perspectives mentioned above, when *tulong* is taken as a cultural system of representation among the poor, ordinary people’s discourses are hidden in the realm of everyday politics. To locate this political discourse in the realm of conventional political institutions, one can only identify the common perception of the poor, which is not fully representative of their desired values and ideas. When put in the public sphere, social practices of *tulong* become *pulitika* that function under patron-client ties. Deriving from “bad” politics, the patron-client relationship turns into a discourse that is constantly being challenged, evaluated, and reaffirmed of its meaning and value. The critical acceptance or rejection of *tulong* among the masses shifts its realm of contestation between election time and everyday life to articulate the masses’ desires and visions in a nonconfrontational manner that is critical to patrons.

Studies on Patron-Client Ties

There are a number of publications that discuss Philippine political change, development, and structures by looking through the lens of the patron-client ties framework. In general, there are two approaches. According to one approach, patron-client ties perpetuate underdeveloped Philippine institutions due to the oligarchic and patrimonial structure of Philippine society. The other approach notes that there are other important political factors—such as ideology, issues, development, and emotional pursuits (such as the *loob*)—that are at play between the subordinated and superordinate and argues that the ties are antagonistic and manifest another political discourse of their own from the bottom up.

Several publications subscribe to the view that modern Philippine politics began with the United States' introduction of political institutions (Steinberg 1972; Cushner 1976; Phelan 1976; Fegan 1982; Larkin 1993; Cullinane 2003; McCoy and de Jesus 2001).³⁾ Benedict Anderson (1996) observes that in the first decade of the twentieth century, the United States brought in its model of a political system that it deemed essential to liberate its colony. The linguistic, property, and literacy qualifications were set so high that only 14 per cent of the adult population was entitled to vote (*ibid.*). Thus, a group of political elites emerged from the mid-nineteenth century who gained their wealth during the Spanish period through the control of land for the production of export crops (Steinberg 1972; Cushner 1976; Phelan 1976; Fegan 1982; Larkin 1993; May 1993; Cullinane 2003; McCoy and de Jesus 2001).

Earlier political scientists such as Carl H. Lande (1965) and other scholars (Hollnsteiner 1963; c.f. Grossholtz 1964; Agpalo 1969; Wurfel 1988)⁴⁾ began to illustrate the polity in the Philippines as constructed through patron-client relationships, kinship networks that formed the basic units of factions that served as the building blocks of political organizations. Clients were dependent on patrons, and their survival was secured through their performance of a "debt of gratitude" or *utang na loob* and shame or *hiya*. Such a relationship—reciprocity and "debt of gratitude"—allowed patrons to attract their own followers, through maneuvering if not manipulation, who subsequently transformed into factions during election time to engage in power struggles. In essence, Philippine political structures remained in the hands of the elites to manipulate electoral institutions for political interests with no genuine political participation, ideology, or representation.

3) One of the most comprehensive studies on the history of the emergence of Philippine elites during the Spanish and American periods, and the involvement and changing relationship of the economic landlords with political elites, is Alfred McCoy and Ed. C. de Jesus, *Philippine Social History: Global Trade and Local Transformations* (2001). More specific case studies on the history of political elites are Michael Cullinane's *Ilustrado Politics: Filipino Elite Responses to American Rule, 1898–1908* (2003) in Manila and Cebu, and John A. Larkin's *The Pampangans: Colonial Society in a Philippine Province* (1993).

4) Hollnsteiner's work is very similar to Lande's in that both contend that Philippine social structures with the characteristics of kinship system, *compadre*, *utang na loob*, and reciprocity behavior manage to construct a smooth relationship between the elites and the masses. Hollnsteiner's study focuses on the elites' perspective on how they construct a relationship with the masses through kinship networks and a *compadres* system within the Hulo society in the province of Bulacan, whether it is during elections or within community associations. Using a slightly different approach, Jean Grossholtz views the following as components of the Philippine political culture and system: bargaining power or quid pro quo, fear of *hiya* (shame) and *gaba* (curse), respect for elders, personalism, a strong family system, superordinate-subordinate relationships, and *pakiusap* (an act of request as a means of communication), or a means of communication—via saints—between God and men.

In a slightly different light, separating themselves from the above assumptions on the elites, who were mainly from the landed class, modernization theorists such as K. G. Machado (1971; 1974a; 1974b; c.f. Kimura 1997; Kawanaka 1998) argue that Philippine politics has taken a shift from personal and kinship networks to political machinery. Due to socioeconomic and organizational changes, increasingly intense national political competition in rural communities, and growing mass participation, politics is no longer confined to traditionally wealthy families but also run by politically skilled leaders or “new men” from less wealthy and less well known family backgrounds (Machado 1974b, 524). The emergence of a new leadership is among middle-class men from *barrio* (district or neighborhood) families who are more likely to respond to demands from national and provincial politicians (*ibid.*, 525). To compete for votes, the political machinery plays a vital role through the provision of immediate material rewards and inducements such as pork barrel programs.

Discussions of factors that have contributed to changes in Philippine politics have taken another shift toward looking at Philippine politics as an “elite democracy.” To Benedict Anderson (1988), Amando Doronila (1985), and Paul D. Hutchcroft (2000), the Philippines remains “underdeveloped” due to the proliferation of “oligarchic elites” or—a term coined by John T. Sidel (1999; c.f. McCoy 2002)—“local bosses” who use guns, goons, and gold and have total control over the weak democratic state both in *Malacañang* and in the provinces. Other scholars, such as Nathan Quimpo (2009), observe that the Philippines has become a predatory regime rather than a predatory state in which political families with business networks continue to plunder the nation. The existence of such a regime, accompanied by the unchanged nature of patron-client ties within society, allows the functioning of informal institutions (Putzel 1999) and contributes to the weak nature of Philippine democratic institutions (Case 1999); the latter are susceptible to constant electoral fraud, corruption, and rampant vote-buying and -selling at the local and provincial levels (c.f. Coronel 2007).

The “elite democracy” approach takes into account the role of violence, coercion, intimidation, and monetary inducements that enable the elites to manipulate formal democratic procedures to suit their personal political interests. Elections are instruments used by political elites to obtain public office and a way for the elites to make the masses feel “incorporated” within their “tutelage.” Such “incorporation” is practiced through intimidating voters, employing violent tactics, and using the Philippine constabulary, army, police forces, political leaders (and patrons) or entrepreneurs, and other institutions to obtain positions in public office.

The study of Philippine politics in the aftermath of the 1986 People Power Revolution, such as the above, focused much attention on the community of elites, the patrimo-

nial state, and the latter's relations with Philippine society. The study of the president as an institution to dominate politics, especially during Marcos's regime (Thompson 1996; Youngblood 1993), once again came to the fore. Slightly different from the patron-client ties framework but elite-oriented nonetheless, politics has been integrated at the national level, or more specifically in the hands of the president.

A few studies have attempted to explain the phenomenon of Joseph Estrada, who was the president of the Philippines from 1998 to 2001. One explanation for his popularity is the populist leaders' thesis, which looks at a combination of factors such as the failure of neoliberal economies, Estrada's popularity through his movies as "saviour of the poor" (c.f. Rosario 2004), his pro-poor programs, and his image as belonging to the "other" elites from the oligarchs (Rocamora 2009; c.f. Polo 2002). The other reason for his popularity, according to Abinales and Amoroso's (2005) argument, is the decline of nongovernmental organizations' reputation as the voice of the public, their inefficient management, and the failure of the left to provide an alternative political discourse, which gave the people reasons to pin their hopes on different yet popular leaders. Estrada was popular despite the allegations of corruption in his administration, his incompetence, and so on.

When Estrada was convicted for corruption, Vice President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (GMA) took up the job. She was reelected as president in 2004. Various studies have categorized GMA's administration as the most corrupt, most autocratic, and most undemocratic since Ferdinand Marcos's regime (Coronel 2007; Abinales 2008; 2010; Thompson 2010). Abinales's article "The Philippines: Weak State, Resilient President" (2008) describes Philippine politics as having unchanged weak institutions, such as the Commission of Elections (COMELEC), that subscribe to electoral fraud under a strong and powerful presidential influence. GMA's influence over the COMELEC was evident in the 2004 general election, when she stood against another popular leader, Fernando Poe Jr. Her control over the army, police, national economic agencies, and judiciary helped her crush her enemies, such as journalists, the left, and the Muslim South (*ibid.*). In Abinales's view, GMA's main political control did not derive from central Manila, where the voices of the opposition were loud. It was at the periphery, namely at the provincial and local government levels, that GMA's presidency was sustained. Political control in the Philippines is still predominantly in the hands of the political elites, only now it is located not at the centre but in the periphery. All politics is "local" (*ibid.*, 302).

Another group of scholars ranging from historians and political scientists to anthropologists and sociologists provide a different perspective on patron-client ties, and some have gone beyond the framework to provide alternative approaches to viewing Philippine politics.

The historian Reynaldo C. Ileto (1999a) argues that Philippine social structures and values have been reduced to patron-client ties: vertical, oppressive, manipulative, repressive power in a top-down fashion. He points out that the “orientalization” of “Philippine social values” has resulted in a dichotomized concept of “the masses” and “the elites.” The “masses” are seen as passive, ignorant, submissive to negative “Filipino social values” and dominated by the “elites” who are capable of manipulating such values and control of offices. In his critical overview on the literature of Philippine politics and society, Ileto concludes that there is an overlooking of the realities “in which power flows from the bottom up, as well, and in which indebtedness is not simply a one-way, oppressive, relationship but rather a reciprocal one” (*ibid.*, 49). In citing Mojares’s work on the Osmeña political family in Cebu City, Ileto agrees that *pulitika* (or politics) is “constantly changing in scope and meaning . . . also *made* by the community” (*ibid.*, 62). More importantly, the theater of politics is constructed not merely by the orators but by the crowds (Ileto 1999b).

Kerkvliet offers another critical review on patron-client ties (1991; 1995; 1996; 2000). He states that Philippine politics emanates from “below” and that politics is embedded in the realm of everyday life experiences. He argues that the patron-client framework is not sufficient to understand Philippine political structures and that clients are indeed critical, antagonistic, and demanding. Relationships between clients and patrons are not smooth and are always in contestation. However, such resistance and contestation do not manifest openly and can hardly be traced in the realm of formal political institutions such as electoral politics—rather, the subaltern’s politics is “indirect, non-confrontational, and hidden” (Kerkvliet 1991).

The works by Michael Pinches (1991) and Benedict Kerkvliet (1991) on subordinated groups in Quezon City, Manila, and the peasantry in Talavera, Nueva Ecija Province, respectively demonstrate that subordinated groups’ claims are not limited to subsistence needs (such as minimum wage, food, or shelter for survival) but also revolve around issues of dignity, respect, and quality of life as human beings. Both works bring to light other ways of interpreting patron-client ties to go beyond material inducements or politics of fear and instead hinge upon a politics of respect and dignity and the masses’ articulated desire for politicians who are issue-oriented and struggle for democracy. Subordinated groups do maintain ties with patrons for material survival, but at the same time they are critical of the social hierarchy and the ways that patrons treat them.

In quite a similar trajectory, Mark Turner’s (1991, 19) study of Zamboanga City argues that politicians also engage in a politics of moral order—moral standing and integrity—that goes beyond the patronage politics of the patron-client ties framework. Employing cultural, linguistic, and anthropological approaches, Resil Mojares’s (2002)

study of the Osmeña family of Cebu indicates that politics should not be seen as “rulers, leaders, and big men” and the “subordination of issues to particularistic concerns,” because of its constant change in scope and meaning. The Osmeñas’ electoral campaigns define politics in terms of “crusades,” which use “primordial symbols of democracy, autonomy, and progress” (*ibid.*, 336).

In contrast to traditional patron-client models, the historical, political-anthropological, cultural, and sociological approaches look at the perspective of the masses, locating politics beyond the formal electoral system and political offices. While recognizing patronage politics and elite dominance, they also indicate the nonmaterial elements of politics, particularly language and culture, that “patrons” use in connection with issues pertaining to development and democracy so as to manifest a rhetoric that is acceptable to their “clients.”

From the above tour of Philippine political studies, we can summarize that the political economy and modernization approaches place politics in the formal institutional realm—such as elections and presidential dominance—and the Philippine state remains weak and vulnerable to elite manipulation while voters or “clients” are susceptible to monetary inducement at the hands of political elites. At the same time, when politics is analyzed as everyday politics, relations between patrons and clients are not cordial. Philippine politics, especially viewed from the bottom-up approach, is issue-oriented and is about social justice, free and fair elections, respect, and dignity. “Clients” are indeed critical and do articulate grievances and their vision for a better society.

The focus of this paper is to expand further the second group of approaches to include other features that underpin values such as equality, responsiveness, and caring at the village level. My field research in *barangays*—one village and one town—indicates that the meaning of politics can be identified in two contesting aspects, which makes the patron-client relationship Janus-faced. When one is talking about politics in the institutional realm—such as elections—patron-client ties are subject to “dirty” politics, including vote-buying, electoral fraud, and elite manipulation, which according to the villagers’ interpretation stands as *pulitika*. The other contested meaning of politics (thus patron-client ties) includes social justice, responsibility, and caring in the realm of everyday politics.

The Janus-facedness of Patron-Client Ties: The Discourse of *Tulong* as Hidden Transcripts from “Below”

Patron-client ties are Janus-faced. To understand this phenomenon, one is required to understand the language used by the masses and differentiate nuances in different con-

texts. When politicians provide help to the people or simply perform the act of *gawa* (action, works) in the context of *pulitika*, *tulong* is at the “dirty” end of politics. Conversely, when *tulong* is integrated with the sentiment of *loob*, the patron is seen as the provider of genuine *tulong*. When the Janus-facedness of patron-client relations is deconstructed, we are able to comprehend the masses’ rationale in supporting politicians.

*Pagkikilatis/Kalkulasyon through Gawa/Pangako*⁵⁾

Ate May: Abe, *makikita mo . . . katulad ko, ako minsan kinikilatis ko rin tao kung siya ay magagawa. Kilala mo naman sa atin, sa mga mukha. Kilala mo ang may magagawa, kilala mo rin ang wala. Iyon ang aking na laang ano. Dahil mahirap din namang manghula. Mahirap din ang ikaw ay kuwan./Katulad ng mga mayor, iyan, katulad ni Corona, kilala mo na siya ay mabait. Sa pagmumukha niya, kilala mo. Marami siyang maa-attract sa kanya na siya ay iboto. Kung siya ay sa paglapit niya ay siya ay masungit, hindi siya iboboto. Pero marami pa ring bumoto sa kanya. Nanalo eh. Dahil alam mo, pagka ang isang, ang isang mga kuwan ay minsan mangangako at wala namang nagagawa, sa susunod, hindi na uli maiboboto.*⁶⁾

[You will see . . . like me, I scrutinize a candidate to see if he/she can do something good. You know [from] their faces. You know if someone can do something or not. It’s difficult to guess./ Like Corona, you know that he is a good man. You know it in his face. If, when you approach him and he’s hot-tempered, no one will vote for him. But a lot of people did. He won. If a candidate promises to do something but doesn’t keep those promises, no one will vote for that candidate again.]

Tito Catapang: *Maraming mapagkunwari eh. Kung tutuusin pag nagpangita kayo akala mo talagang totoong-totoo. Syempre, nahahalata mo naman ang sino dito ang talagang magaling na tao at hindi./ Parang babatayan mo sa klase ng, iyon nga, ng mga galaw nila.*⁷⁾

[There are many fakes. Sometimes when you meet them, you think they’re sincere. Of course, you will be able to see which one is a good person and which is not./You will base it on the kind of actions they do.]

Alberto: *Sa gawa makikita ang isang kuwan. Huwag kang maniniwala sa pangako dahil iyong pangako wala iyon. Pag nasabi iyon sa ngayon, bukas wala na iyon. Parang pinangakuang pag-ibig, makahalik lang, ano? Sabi sa dalaga mahal na mahal kita ngayon lang araw na ito, bukas hindi na. Ano, di ba ganon ang nanliligaw, ano?*⁸⁾

5) The transcriptions in this section are verbatim and do not follow the proper grammatical structure of the Tagalog language system, so as to preserve the originality of the interviews. The author would like to thank Ms. Charmaine for her assistance with translations and transcriptions. The names of the interviewees, the *barangays*, and precinct are pseudonyms.

6) Ate May (former canteen owner). Interview by author, February 18, 2005, Barangay Angeles, Tanauan City.

7) Tito Catapang (former vendor). Interview by author, February 24, 2005, Barangay Angeles, Tanauan City.

8) Alberto (farmer). Interview by author, April 18, 2005, Barangay Angeles, Tanauan City.

[You can see it in their actions. Don't believe in promises, because they mean nothing. If a promise is made today, it'll be gone tomorrow. It's like a promise of love just to get a kiss in return, right? The man says to the woman, "I love you very much" today—just today, but not tomorrow. Isn't that how you court someone?]

The interviews with Ate May, Tito Catapang, and Alberto refer to the campaign period, when there was a possibility that promises made by a candidate would not be kept and also that promises were uncertain for they were merely ad hoc strategies by politicians to gain support. Arguably, a politician can enhance his/her image by making *pangako* (promises). However, people know that politicians' *pangako* may be made to simply "court" voters. This is indicated in Alberto's metaphor that giving promises is similar to courting a woman: promises are mere rhetoric.

As we can see from the above statements, *kilatis* (scrutiny) and *kalkulasyon* (calculation) serve as the twin bases for discerning and judging the moral fabric of a leader—in this case, the mayor. Ordinary people's calculations are not made irrationally or in a sloppy fashion, but are arrived at through *gawa* (work, an action, or a result of work, task, duty) that can be seen (*kita*) and *pangako* (promises) that can be heard. Judgments about the intentions of superordinates are made concrete by reading their bodily gestures and facial expressions (*pagmumukha*). The scrutiny is directed toward the leader's *loob* (inner being) and is expressed in the description of the qualities of a human being—whether he is a good person (*mabait/magaling na tao*), hot-tempered (*masungit*), or a fake (*mapagkunwari*).

In order for *gawa*—mostly related to local development projects such as agrarian funding, provision of pesticides, school building, *barangay* basketball courts, health care, scholarships, jobs, and so on—to be appreciated or felt, a leader is required to have a sincere *loob*. The mayor's *gawa*, as indicated in the interview above, is appreciated only when the *loob* of the person is scrutinized: whether he or she is a good person, a hot-tempered person, or a fake/deceiver. A *gawa* that is without the element of *loob* is just a mechanical action, occurring in the realm of formal politics, i.e., public life and local development. It remains an emotionless *gawa* that can only be seen (*kita*) but not felt, which potentially can be used against voters during election time. To appreciate the *gawa*, it has to be scrutinized according to whether or not there is an association of *loob*. When this connection is achieved, then *gawa* becomes *real*, the public activity becomes linked to the state of a person's *loob*, i.e., whether it is *mabait*, *masungit*, *mapagkunwari*, or *talagang totoong-totoo* (true, sincere).

Hence, making a decision based on a politician's *pangako* is never sufficient in ordinary people's perception. As indicated above, rather than relying on a politician's *pangako*, people judge the politician through the *gawa*. *Gawa* will not be appreciated if the politi-

cian’s *loob* is tainted with insincerity. One person’s ability to scrutinize another person’s *loob* through *gawa* can be reached only when both their *loob* correspond with each other or, in ordinary people’s language, when they “feel” (*nararamdaman*) the *loob*.

Utang and Loob vis-à-vis Utang na Loob

When discussing patron-client ties, we cannot run away from the values of *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude). In conventional political studies, the concept of *loob* (inner being) has always been linked to the social practice of *utang* (debt). A dyadic relationship is maintained wherein *utang na loob* is a hierarchical exchange of gifts between a landlord and a tenant, a superordinate and a subordinate. Failure to reciprocate invites *hiya* (shame), or the stigma of being *walang hiya* (no shame). Subordinates can never really be discharged from their debt to the superordinates, and therefore choices are made in accordance with the former’s own powerlessness that creates scope for manipulation by superordinates.

There is more to *utang na loob* than is presented in conventional political studies, however. This section demonstrates how ordinary people interpret *utang na loob*, seen as a sociocultural practice in multifaceted ways in relation to the practices of *tulong*. The interview below showcases precisely the aforementioned “sincere” criteria in an ideal *utang na loob* relationship, as gleaned from the conversation I had with Kuya Bong on the 2004 elections:

Eh syempre, hindi naman natin, hindi nating maaaring sabihin na si Sonia kaya hindi nanalo masamang tao. Hindi naman. Syempre iyong, komo ang kilala namin na sapul ay si Corona, syempre, unang-una eh kami’y nakinabang na noong una niyang term. Eh syempre, mayroon na kaming konting utang na loob sa kanya. Sa bagay, kay Sonia, ganon din dahil itong, halimbawa, may anak ako na nagtatrabaho, halimbawa, sa Yazaki. May utang na loob din ako, pero iba, iba naman ang klaseng utang na loob ko doon kay Torres dahil iyong aking anak kung nagtatrabaho man doon, nakikinabang sila, ano? Hindi katulad ng kay Corona na siya ay aming ibinoto na ang kapalit naman ng kay Corona ay iyong buong puso naman niya na ibinibigay sa amin na wala namang kapalit. Syempre, saan ka naman lalagay? . . . Ayan, katulad ng mga lambat na iyan; marami kami dito binigyan, walang siningil kahit singko. Ang hinihiling nga niya pag may miting, kinakailangan eh lahat naroon para maunawaan, para malaman. . . .⁹⁾

[Of course, we can’t say that the reason why Sonia (Sonia Torres Aquino, Mayor Corona’s rival in the 2004 election) lost is because she’s a bad person. It’s just that we knew Corona from the very beginning because we’ve been able to benefit from his first term. Of course, we have a debt of gratitude to him. I have a child who works in Yazaki. I also have a debt of gratitude to Sonia, but

9) Kuya Bong (fisherman). Interview by author, March 16, 2005, Barangay Angeles, Tanauan City.

it's a different kind of debt because as my child works there, she [also] benefits from it, right? In the case of Corona, we voted for him because he gives wholeheartedly without expecting anything in return. Of course, there's never any doubt that we would support him. We would support Corona because he doesn't ask for anything in return. . . . Like those [fishing] nets there, there are a lot of us here who were given those, and he never asked for anything in return. He only asks that we attend meetings so that we all know and understand. . . .]

The use of *utang na loob* in this interview reveals the multilayered meanings of *utang* and *loob*. The importance of *utang*, and the appreciation of *loob*, are given different weights and judged at different levels. At one level, we note that the provision of employment to Kuya Bong's daughter by Sonia Torres Aquino simultaneously benefited (*nakikinabang*) the employer (the company owned by Sonia's brother). Furthermore, Kuya Bong's support of Corona is determined according to whether or not the latter is doing (*gawa*) his tasks well as a politician. In such cases, *utang na loob* does not connote gratitude, as is usually assumed. In the first instance, even if a job is provided, the "debt" (*utang*) has already been repaid in the form of labor services where both parties eventually benefit. In the second instance there is the recognition on the part of the "debtor" that it is the obligation of a politician to perform (*gawa*) his/her responsibilities as a civil servant to the people. There is an exchange of gifts involved—an act of reciprocity based on the payment and repayment of *utang*—in this case fishing nets. However, the *loob* of Kuya Bong appears not to be compromised at all. Kuya Bong has assessed the "gratitude" or *loob* side of the material help, the *tulong*, by recognizing in it the sentiment of moral duty on the part of his superordinate, that is, the mayor (Corona), who does not ask for anything in return except attendance at meetings. Kuya Bong is weighing the qualitative return between Sonia and Corona. Both provide help but of different types. Sonia's help consists of a mutually beneficial calculation of interests written into her job description, while Corona's help contains the moral duty of a civil servant to the people.

In the previous section, we discussed how *gawa* becomes *tulong* when it is accompanied by a sentiment from the *loob*. Let us extend the discussion of *gawa* further in the context of *tulong* and *utang na loob*. The *gawa* and the *tulong* carry different connotations. On one hand, we have the *gawa*: the material aspect of an activity that can be seen or touched, or the physical reality of the politician's performance as a public servant. Therefore, the *gawa* can be regarded as mere *utang* that can be repaid through, for instance, labor services. *Tulong*, on the other hand, is the nonmaterial dimension of help that resides in the feeling (*pakiramdam*) of one's inner being—the *loob*—being manifested in the physical reality. Therefore, *tulong* is associated with *loob* and cannot be measured in terms of material repayment. In the context of *utang na loob*, when support is given to

a leader, it is the mutual respect of each other’s *loob*, not the *utang*, that is being recognized and reciprocated.

Deriving from Kuya Bong’s experiences of *gawa* with Corona and Sonia, the *utang* in terms of economic beneficence is not omnipotent. The goodness of a leader is not significantly measured by the economic advantage or “survival of means of production” that results from an exchange of gifts. Ordinary people negotiate and reciprocate their support to a politician through their appreciation of the *loob* of the person (*tao*) or leader. Yielding to the *loob* of a leader comes about, however, only after scrutiny based on a sustained observation of that person’s deeds. It is the moral sentiment of the *loob* manifested in the act of *gawa*, such as not asking for anything in return—*walang kapalit* (no return) or *walang kabayaran* (no payment)—that people look for and appreciate. This serves as a gauge for the sense of humanity (*pagkatao*) in a politician that can be felt (*maramdaman*) by constituents. When the workings of a leader’s *loob* can be “felt,” then *gawa* becomes genuine *tulong*. Speaking of *utang na loob*, it was Corona’s *tulong*, rather than Sonia’s *gawa*, that Kuya Bong was referring to. Kuya Bong’s *utang na loob* came about as a response to Corona’s *mabait/magandang loob* (kindheartedness/good inner being) that he appreciated and therefore reciprocated in terms of *loob* (through his support to Corona), more than the obligation to repay the economic component of the debt or the fear of the social stigma of *hiya* (shame).

“*Utang*,” in fact, becomes a modifier when connected by the ligature “*na*” to “*loob*”: it becomes the adjective “*utang na loob*,” illustrating the noneconomic nature of the currency of the *utang*. The *utang na loob* in Kuya Bong’s language of reciprocity underlies the modified “*loob*” within the act of *tulong* manifested by a person (*tao*)—whether a politician or non-politician—thereby making the economic *utang*, the modifier, meaningful to ordinary people. Therefore, to understand why ordinary people appreciate help from a politician in the context of *utang na loob*, one has to differentiate between the *gawa*, which produces a mechanical exchange of debt, and the *tulong*, which manifests the “emotional,” immaterial, and much more important side of *utang*.

The analysis above indicates that *loob* serves as an emotional platform for ordinary people to scrutinize their leaders beneath their surface acts. The social practices of *pagkikilatis/kalkulasyon* (scrutinization/calculation) in *gawa* and *pangako* prove to be fundamental concepts in understanding how ordinary people negotiate political relationships with their leaders. Deriving from *utang na loob*, especially of the *loob* that lies within and informs the *utang*, ordinary people are looking for a “harmonization” of *loob* that can be felt (*maramdaman*). When this is reached, ordinary people see politics, which operates in everyday politics, as being about *magandang loob* (goodwill), *mabait* (goodness), justice, respect, and genuineness.

Through our previous discussion of the bases for scrutiny from the perspective of ordinary people, we can appreciate the local concepts that enable us to understand ordinary people's distaste for conventional politics and how the field of meaningful politics can be different from that of *pulitika*, which is seen as dominated by the elites, especially at election time. More important is that the masses' understanding of patron-client ties is Janus-faced, a view that conventional political studies would subscribe to: factional contests, the culture of indebtedness, playing out of ambitions, and power struggles. We now turn to the discussion of *pulitika* as interpreted by the masses.

The Interpretation of *Pulitika*

The masses, or "clients," are indeed a critical component of patron-client ties. The masses do realize the consequences of receiving help from patrons and the consequences during election time. In the context of *pulitika*, the Janus-facedness of patron-client ties is in the realm of "bad" politics. The analysis of concepts such as *gawa* versus *pangako* helps us to understand the meaning and nuances of politics from the perspective of ordinary people. This manifestation of politics among the masses is not seen in the realm of formal politics or in front of politicians. The way I understand it, the public transcript that the masses manifest at the level of *pulitika* is "games" played with politicians; the masses tread cautiously so as not to reveal their intention (in this context their preferred candidate) and at the same time exploit the election campaign for short-term interests.

The conversation below pertains to how *pulitiko* (politicians) behave in the context of *pulitika*. This conversation was held when electoral candidates came to meet people (specifically women's groups) during the campaign period. Through the help of *liders* (leaders), meetings were organized and political messages were slipped into the meeting agendas to court for votes.

Ate Jul: *Oo, mga sinasabi sa mga member, o, dalin natin si ganito. Kasi may lider kami, o, ang dadalin natin si ganito. May sasabihin sa iyong dala. Eh pero, kami syempre, hindi ka naman pwedeng sumagot na aba'y hindi. Hindi pwede. Kaya lang ang tinatanong namin iyong puso namin. Kahit pa ba kami utusan mo, syempre, tango ka lang dyan nang tango. Pulitika din ang gagamitin mo dyan eh! Hindi ka pwedeng, ayaw ko sa kanya. Baka mamaya . . .*

[Yes, they tell their members to support a particular candidate. Of course, you can't say no. We just ask our hearts. Even if you order us, of course, we just say: "We also use politics!" You can't explicitly say you don't like the candidate. Maybe next time . . .]

Ate Liz: *Pagdating ng araw na—*
[When the time comes—]

Ate Jul: *Ito lang ang tatanungin mo, ang ballpen kasi ikaw naman ang magsusulat. Ikaw ang magsusulat, eh di ang, kahit pa ba sabihin sa iyo, kung hindi mo gusto iyong ano, eh di isulat mo iyong kursunada mo.*

[You’ll be the one to write, not your ball pen. So no matter what they tell you, you just vote for whomever you want.]

Ate Liz: *Pag magkakaharap, sige ho. Pagdating ng araw . . .*

[If you’re faced with each other, OK. But when the time comes . . .]

Ate Jul: *Pag hindi ka kasi naging matalino, wala eh. Kasi kung umayon din lang naman tayo nang umayon tapos wala din, wala din namang naitutulong, nakakasama lang ng loob eh. Ay, di mabuti pang iboto mo iyong kursunada mo. Kahit walang maitulong, kahit papano hindi sasama ang loob mo dahil ikaw ang bumoto ng kursunada mo. Ay, mahirap kasi iyong patuturo ka sa pagboto tapos, syempre, pangako iyan nang pangako. Aasa ka doon sa mga pangako. Tapos ang ibinoto mo pagdating ng oras na nakiusap ka eh hihindian ka, wala. Sasama lang ang loob mo.*

[If you’re not smart, nothing will become of you. If we only say yes and not think about it, and in the long run the candidates we hastily voted for don’t really help us, we’ll just feel bad. So it’s better to vote for whomever you like. Even if that person isn’t able to help you, you won’t feel bad because you only have yourself to blame. It’s hard to be carried away by promises. Of course, you will get your hopes up for the promises. Then the person you voted for will turn you away when you ask for help. You’ll just feel bad.]

Ate Liz: *Mahirap nang sumama sa agos.*¹⁰⁾

[It’s hard to get carried by the tide.]

Pulitika, as an English loanword, literally means “politics” but connotes a nuance that does not involve the scope of politics, i.e., consensual democracy and civic life. From the conversation above, *pulitika* is equated with false promises. In *pulitika*, favors and material incentives are given by a candidate to court for votes. Similar to our discussion on the difference between *pangako* and *gawa*, a candidate usually gives promises only to influence voters. Favors, help, and promises that are provided during election time are not similar to the *tulong* (help) that is extended in everyday life. In the local expression, *pulitika* is similar to someone who is seen crawling under the cover of night and slipping bribe money under the door: “*Ang iba pa nga dyan nagbibigay ng pera, ang tinatawag na gapang sa gabi, abot sa pinto* (Some others give money; it’s what is called crawling in the night, until the door).”¹¹⁾

Ate Jul is cautiously aware of the promises and favors given during election time. She is also aware of the consequences of being open and honest with leaders on her choice

10) Conversation between Ate Liz (sari-sari store owner) and Ate Jul (farmer). Interview by author, April 14, 2005, Barangay Angeles, Tanauan City.

11) Tatay Bending (canteen helper). Interview by author, March 4, 2005, Barangay 1, Tanauan City.

of candidates. To her, these are mere strategies within *pulitika* that do not bring guarantees or security to the people after election. In her perception, *pulitika* is deceitful and does not ensure security. Thus, one is required to be *matalino* (smart) in order not to be disappointed after elections. The help given in the context of *pulitika* does not involve the *loob*, as we have discussed in previous sections—i.e., it does not manifest *magandang loob*. It is merely a pure political stratagem to win votes. And interestingly, Ate Jul is also playing political games.

The ideal way of “doing” politics is to vote for someone according to one’s scrutiny of the politician and their inner being/self (*loob*): “*Kaya lang ang tinatanong namin iyong puso namin* (We just ask our hearts).” The reference to the *loob* expressed in *puso* highlights how ordinary people’s “feelings” operate in politics (not *pulitika*), such as, for example, their assessment of politicians through the feeling of their distance (*malayo*) or closeness (*malapit*) in order not to be disappointed and to be able to ask for *tulong* later on. When someone says, quoting from the interviews above, “You’ll be the one to write, not your ball pen. So no matter what they tell you, you just vote for whomever you want” or “Even if that person isn’t able to help you, you won’t feel bad because you only have yourself to blame,” this indicates that one has the ability to scrutinize whoever is considered to be a *mabait na tao* (good person) and it is important to vote for someone who is trustworthy. If *tulong* is not provided, at least the *loob* or the self (*sarili*) will not be tainted by guilt and disappointment.

In this regard, the kind of voting behavior that is based on the blind acceptance of blank promises and receiving favors as unscrupulous “clients” during elections pollutes people’s *loob*, and the consequence will be the negligence of the welfare of people; in short, a sinister *pulitika* is at work, which leads to future disappointment, and so we must try to avoid being pulled in.

Another dimension of *pulitika* is the employment of tactics and strategies. The relationship between a candidate and a voter is based on a cautious calculation of strategies to avoid being stigmatized as *walang hiya* (shameless) in trying to secure future benefits. This is also expressed in the abovementioned conversation between Ate Liz and Ate Jul. We can see Ate Liz’s calculation of the possibility of future consequences—“*Pagdating ng araw na . . .* (When the time comes . . .)” —which means that even though she does not like a candidate, she will still reserve a space for negotiating a future relationship with that politician, which means having to avoid making negative comments explicitly to a candidate. In *pulitika*, both parties (candidate and constituent) are playing strategic games with their requisite tactics: “*Kahit pa ba kami utusan mo, syempre, tango ka lang dyan nang tango. Pulitika din ang gagamitin mo dyan eh* (Even when we are being given orders, of course, we just nod and nod [in assent]. We also use politics in that case!)”

Finally, *pulitika* is perceived as a game that politicians introduce and which people play along with. Like children they form camps and go with one or the other leader, but after the game is over the losers disappear. In other words, *pulitika* is not a serious undertaking by the community at large. But if it is just a game, who ultimately benefits from it?

Tatay Bending: *Iyon ang mga nakakaintindi sa pulitika. Dito sa bayan eh ang pulitika eh parang ano laang, iyong parang laro laang ng mga bata, kanya-kanyang bata. O, bata ko iyan. O, bata ko ito. Sama ka sa amin. Eh di hati tayo. Ganyan lang iyan eh. Pagkatapos naman ng botohan eh matatalo iyong isa. O, ano? Saan ang bata?* [Laughs]

[They (the candidates) understand politics. Here in town, politics is like a **game for children**—each with his/her own children to support. That’s my kid. That one’s my kid. Come with us. We share. That’s the way it is. After the elections and one loses, what now? Where’s your kid? [Laughs]]

Tatay Bending: *Noong una, mayroon. Eh sa ngayon, eh ang mga ano naman ngayon, kumbaga sa ano eh botohan, hindi pantay, hindi patas ang laro.*

[At first, it (politics) could make a difference. But now, voting isn’t equal. The **game** isn’t played on an equal footing.]¹²⁾

The perception of *pulitika* as a game of politicians that temporarily draws in ordinary people is more vividly shown in the dialogue below on Tatay Bending’s experiences with politicians.

Woman: *Hindi kasi naboto si tiyo eh.*

[Uncle does not vote.]

Tatay Bending: *Nadala ako. Dahil sa aking anak, dahil sa aking anak na napagbintangan ng marijuana. Kaya ako’y nagalit eh dahil sa nagkasakit na ang aking anak eh kinuha pa. Noong kinuha, nailabas naman ng kapitan dyan sa barangay dos. Naiuwi, eh di nagkasakit. Naggawa ng bahay doon sa ilog na para hindi siya maligalig. Ngayon eh ___ sa paa, nagkasakit, kinukuha na ulit ng pulis. Sabi namin eh huwag muna, magpapagaling muna. Hindi ika, sandali laang, kakasapin laang. Eh mahina na, wala nang boses. Aba, eh ikinulong! Hindi man lang, pupunta sa center eh. Hindi na makalakad, hindi na makahakbang, ganyan. Eh pagka ganyan, nauupo, nagpapahinga. May posas pa. Paano kang matutuwa noon? Lalagyan pa ng posas eh ang lapit-lapit naman ng center. Bago sasabihin ng pulis eh iyon daw eh kanilang ___. Kalokohan iyan! Hindi na nga makalakad, lalagyan mo pa ng posas.*

[I learned my lesson. It’s because of my son who was accused of (possessing) marijuana. I got so angry because they took my son away even though he was sick. When he was taken, the captain of the *barangay* bailed him out. He was brought home, and he got sick. There was a house there

12) Tatay Bending (canteen helper). Interview by author with a woman and Tatay Bending, March 4, 2005, Barangay 1, Tanauan City.

near the river, which was built so he wouldn't cause trouble. Now ____ (mis-recording), when he was sick, the police took him away again. We told them (the police) to wait until my son was better. They said they'd take him for just a little while, only to talk. My son was so weak, he didn't even have a voice (he couldn't talk). He was jailed! He wasn't even allowed to go to the (health) center. He couldn't walk, couldn't take a step on his own. When he climbed a stair, he had to sit down and rest. He was even handcuffed. How can you be happy with that? They handcuffed him when the (health) center was just so near. Then the police said ____ (mis-recording). That's foolishness! He couldn't even walk, and they handcuffed him.]

Woman: *So karamihan talaga ang bawal na gamot talaga hindi mo, laganap na talaga. Hindi na masugpo eh. Ni-raid ang Maruha noon. Damay iyong anak ni tiyo. Binata, ikinulong, namayat, namatay. Hindi nagawan ng paraan ni mayor.*

[Drugs are really prevalent now. It can't be solved. Maruha (a precinct in Barangay 1) was raided then. Uncle's (Tatay Bending's) son got involved. He was unmarried, and he was jailed, got thin, and died. The mayor wasn't able to do anything.]

Tatay Bending: *Di nagawan gawa ng dadalin sa Batangas eh. Aayaw-ayaw. Naghihingalo na eh, dala ang ambulansya, kagkag, ay hindi na nakarating ng Batangas. Bumalik na. Wala nang pag-asa eh. Paano ka matutuwa niyan? Tumutulong ka sa kanila eh, tapos ngayon eh wala ring nangyari. O, di tapos na.*

[They were supposed to bring him to Batangas (City). When he was on the verge of death, they put him in an ambulance and rushed him to Batangas, but they weren't able to get there. They came back. It was hopeless. How can you be happy with that? You help them (the politicians), but nothing happened. There, it's finished.]

Woman: *Nadala na si tiyong bumoto.*

[Uncle learned his lesson about voting.]

Tatay Bending: *Pagka ako'y pinipilit, eh di kayo na ang bumoto. Huwag mo na akong isasali dyan. May pera eh. Matatapkan ka.¹³⁾*

[When I'm being forced, I tell them to go ahead and vote. Don't involve me there. They have money. They will step on you.]

One perspective on the above narrative would be that the incident was an exceptional case as it involved death, and therefore the resentment was at a more personal level of emotional assertion, not necessarily a spelling out of ordinary people's understanding of *pulitika*. Nevertheless, the fact that Tatay Bending had been turned away from help at a particularly critical time is connected by him with the meaning of *pulitika* in general. The incident has taught him to stop voting, i.e., to abandon that system of politics altogether. *Pulitika* connotes a negative domain that cannot guarantee one's

13) A woman and Tatay Bending (both canteen helpers). Interview by author, March 4, 2005, Barangay 1, Tanauan City.

(especially the poor’s) welfare, similar to *pangako* seen as rhetoric during election time. Elections are just a temporary space for politicians to court for votes and fulfill their desire for power. In *pulitika*, the ultimate consequence is oppression, i.e., *matatapakan* (to step or suppress), blank promises, and the absence of compassion toward others (i.e., no help was given in a time of need to save Tatay Bending’s son). Thus, *pulitika* is just like a game for children—“*parang laro laang ng mga bata*”—that perhaps benefits the rich (*mayaman*) and the politicians (*pulitiko*), but not the poor (*mahirap*).

To sum up this session, the patron-client ties that function in the *pulitika* context pertain to “bad” politics that serve the vested interests of both parties, but predominantly on the patron side. With the cultivation of ties between the two parties, interests become loyalty and loyalty becomes “culture.” Patron-client ties take the form of “bad” politics at the expense of people’s welfare, responsive governance, and democracy. In Iletto’s (1999b, 160) definition:

Pulitika is the perception of politics as a process of bargaining, with implicit self or factional interests involved. The interaction between colonial power and its native words was *pulitika*. At another level, it refers to the practices by which leaders cultivate ties of personal loyalty and indebtedness to them, or simply attract votes.

According to Resil Mojares (2002, 338) *pulitika* “. . . is imaged in terms of elite factional competition (*inilungay sa katungdanan*), manipulation (*maneobra*), spectacle, and dissimulation.”

Both definitions of *pulitika* above reverberate with the perceptions of ordinary people in the *barangay* regarding *pulitika*—that it is a game dominated by the elites, the *mayaman*, and the *pulitiko*, introduced during election times to involve the people in politics and to employ various stratagems with which to court for votes. In sum, to study popular politics, we are required to extend the scope of politics to include *pulitika* but to go beyond it as well. To understand what politics really means to the people, we need to incorporate the politics of emotion in their everyday lives and realign our analytical sights to the all-important idiom of *loob*, expressed in various social concepts such as *magandang loob*, *mabait*, and *utang na loob* as previously shown.

Concluding Remarks

Tulong (help), whether it is studied through the political economist, culturalist, or structuralist approach, has always been a convenient concept to describe the ties between patrons and clients, disguised in material rewards or personal services, which are simply

seen as *gawa*. This paper uses the approaches that stress an analysis of the lexicon of language and sociocultural context and argues that to understand ordinary people's politics, it is essential to decode and interpret the "hidden" political behavior of the masses and their interpretation of *tulong* not merely from a political economic aspect, but more importantly from a sociological and cultural aspect. What is lacking is the taken-for-granted Janus-facedness of patron-client ties, especially the interpretation of the clients' side, their "submission" into the *tulong* provided by the patron—in other words, their acceptance of *tulong*.

Ordinary people's contestations cannot be seen as a claim for power and pragmatic interests. Rather, they are ways of asserting the people's views of what an ideal, or at least better, society should be. In ordinary people's reckoning, the attachment to the "soul stuff" of a leader is actually the act of justifying, scrutinizing, and claiming for respect and dignity, equality, and justice that is without discrimination and is free of corruption. Such reckoning is manifested at the level of everyday politics.

Kerkvliet (1991; 1995) rightly points out that politics or political activities can be identified at two levels. One is the level of formalized political institutions such as election campaigns, deliberation of legislations, public policies, governance, and so on. However, to comprehend the politics of the masses or the subordinates, another level of politicking is useful. Kerkvliet's concept of everyday politics—defined as an "unorganized and informal discourse and activity of everyday politics where people come to terms with and/or contest norms and rules regarding authority, production, and the allocation of resources" (1995, 418)—is the realm of the subalterns' political activities. The subalterns' "hidden" political behavior is intended not to jeopardize their connection with the patrons, whom they see as essential for their survival. This is similar to Scott's *Hidden Transcripts* (1990), which captures the behind-the-scenes political discourse in this manner. Scott's (1985) other works in rural Malaysia indicate the way in which peasants do contest and resist but their practices of contestation are hidden from the superordinate; they are nonrevolutionary and yet antagonistic to their unequal relationship with the patrons. What is significant in Scott's and Kerkvliet's works is that they recognize the everyday politics of the masses and understand that it is antagonistic to the patrons in a subtle manner. The subalterns do speak and contest. *Tulong* in the rural Philippines is one such discourse that helps to understand peasants' demands and articulations.

In rural areas of the Philippines, *tulong* has always been practiced and connotes different meaning in different contexts. It can be in the form of votes, financial aid, services, and so on. When *tulong* is put in the context of elections, such as in the form of promises for local development, it becomes something that is "dirty," manipulative, and selfish.

To the masses, this is *pulitika* and the *tulong* (or *gawa*) is a mere stratagem of the patrons to court for votes. *Tulong* in the *pulitika* context subscribes to the patron-client ties of hierarchy, favoritism, debt of gratitude, and manipulation. In this context, *tulong* is seen as *gawa*, which refers to the context of development. *Gawa* does not connote “bad” politics as in the case of *pulitika*. It is more the responsibility of the government to the people, but it potentially can be used against clients in the *pulitika* context when it comes to elections. However, patron-client ties are not static, nor do they remain at the “dirty” end of politics. When *gawa* turns into *tulong* to include the sentiment of *loob*, the Janus-facedness of patron-client ties is evident in the shift toward “good” politics.

This paper does not intend to dismiss the patron-client ties framework or to constitute another theoretical framework for understanding Philippine politics. While recognizing the patron-client ties at work in Philippine society, the paper also argues that there are other political features in play—whether to construct a more responsive government or to sustain patronage politics at the expense of democracy. Unfortunately, as has been showcased by many incidents and events, Philippine politics remains underdeveloped—judging from the country’s political instability, such as in the southern part of the archipelago; insignificant if not stagnating economic growth; and social problems, especially the nation’s unresolved poverty.

Some researchers might question the significance of studying the masses’ interpretation of *tulong*, since there is a persistence of “bad” politics in the Philippines, especially in rural areas where patron-client ties are prevalent and customary. It is difficult to identify precisely where the political deficiency lies—with the patrons or with the voters. It is also difficult to determine whether the voters are selling their votes for short-term advantages and are thus disrespectful of democratic institutions. Thus far, I am only able to provide the discourse of politics in which the people share their stories and views about politicians. Whether these contested views will translate into votes for change is difficult to determine. Providing answers to these issues requires a more thorough analysis and deeper research. I am merely providing alternative ways to explain the rationale of the masses in the realm of everyday politics, which I believe is essential to understanding the masses’ political activities and interpreting their relationship with politicians.

However, my preliminary observation tends to support the hypothesis that the reason the masses continue to engage in patron-client ties is because formal institutions have failed them. What is available in the realm of formal politics is government officials such as politicians, and relationships with them need to be cultivated. The masses know very well that if they hope to gain from the institutional setup, the game needs to be played well and cautiously. The Philippine masses are not passive or submissive to “dirty” politics. Nor do they blindly submit to the patrons due to vested interests. Their

political activities extend beyond this. The masses also look for responsive leadership in the realm of everyday politics. To turn such “politics” into another institution requires much more than this analysis can discern. Equally important, we should attempt to understand the “politicking” of the masses and to recognize that the masses are not ignorant, uneducated, or simply vying for material rewards and money, especially during election time. Their socioeconomic conditions, social relational dynamics with politicians, encounters with fellow *barangay* folks, and ideas of morality shape the way they “do” politics. However, this does not mean that all things are static and bounded within a given cultural setting or standard rules of conduct. By understanding the multifaceted political behaviors and constant shifts of social hierarchy, we might be able to appreciate the nonlinearity of the historical construct and complexities of a community such as in Barangay Angeles.

Lastly, I remember during my field research when a nonpolitical figure was helping the community, he or she would be “pushed” to become a politician, for that personality had desirable qualities according to the people in the community. Unfortunately, when a person became a political official, the desirable qualities were usually not sustained and the politician fell prey to corruption and money politics. I shall conclude this paper by quoting from an interview I conducted with a farmer to indicate his distaste for Philippine society, which fits in with my description of people’s view against regarding *pulitiko* as beacons of hope to help the community.

*Mga tao dito may konsyensya dahil lahat naman maka-Diyos ang tao eh. Problema laang pag nasingitan ng pera. Kasi ang Diyos ng tao dalawa eh. Sabi noong iba, devil. Hindi, pera. . . . Pera, pera ang nagiging dahilan ng kasamaan.*¹⁴⁾

[People here have a conscience, because everyone is religious. The problem starts when money comes into the picture. People worship two gods. Others say it’s the devil. Isn’t it? **It’s money.** . . . **You wouldn’t be evil if not for money.**]

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