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***Tatay Digong, Ka-DDS, and Sakop:
Filipino Populism Under Duterte in the Light
of Leonardo Mercado's Sakop¹***

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Abstract

The paper provides a historical take on Filipino populism particularly former President Rodrigo Duterte's leadership. The study contends that Duterte's populism relies on his charisma as a strongman, where he frames his image as the father of the nation. The study relates this to Filipino philosopher Leonardo Mercado's concept of *sakop*. This notion is best seen in the Filipinos' harmonization of familial relations into other areas in society.

Keywords: *populism, Duterte administration, sakop, Leonardo Mercado.*

In recent years, politicians around the world would see the emergence of populism, which is here defined as a political ideology that appeals to the general public's interest while challenging the authority of a morally compromised ruling elite. We see this clear in the rise of leaders like Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil, Narendra Modi of India, Donald Trump of

¹ The topic was first presented during the 5th DLSU Undergraduate Philosophy Conference in 2020, became his undergraduate thesis, and was presented at the UP-Diliman's KaPiTas Undergraduate Philosophy Conference in 2021. The author expresses his profound thanks to everyone, from conference audiences to the anonymous reviewers, for the insightful feedback on this paper. The author acknowledges the suggestions from Rhoderick John S. Abellanosa, as well as the blind reviewers of the paper.

America, and even Rodrigo Duterte. Populism is not a new type of political phenomenon. Its earliest form is traced back to the 1848 Paris Commune. During this time, two major perspectives came forward and sought to identify people's collective personality. One camp described people as "honest, self-sacrificing agents of revolution and modernity." The other described the mass as a group of "irrationality and delusion, a wild surge of adolescence that could lay waste to established orders," which espouse "the suggestible and destructive instincts of a primitive epoch."²

Populism, in this era, focused mainly on the people as having power over history, a power that could forward a transition from one epoch to another or a step backward into regression. The modern form of populism³ can be described as the "idea that political sovereignty belongs to and should be exercised by 'the people,' an abstracted group recognizable by a capacity to form a political majority, a united 'oversoul', and as the sole group who holds the moral right, they stand in an offensive against the antagonists of their embattled land.⁴ Their enemies, the elites who run the country, are characterized as personifications of the ideals of liberal democracy⁵.

² Gavin Jacobson, "The Complex Roots of Populism," *Newstatesman*, November 28, 2018, [url:https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2018/11/populism-book-review-muller-eatwell-goodwin-mudde-kaltwasser-mouffe](https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2018/11/populism-book-review-muller-eatwell-goodwin-mudde-kaltwasser-mouffe).

³ In Pappas's article, he posits modern populism along the backdrop of classical populism (identified by its working-class social basis, its mass movement character, and the importance of "charismatic" leadership), Neoliberal populism (identified by its social basis of the rural poor, the implementation of neoliberal policies, the existence of "charismatic" leadership), and the contemporary populism (focuses on actors, actions, style, domain, consequences, and normative implications). The author adheres to his conception of modern populism as "the idea that political sovereignty belongs to and should be exercised by 'the people.'" Takis S. Pappas, "Modern Populism: Research Advances, Conceptual and Methodological Pitfalls, and the Minimal Definition." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, March 3, 2016, doi:10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.17, 3-6, 14.

⁴ Pappas, "Modern Populism," 14.

⁵ Liberal democracy here is posited as the existing political system which, for the populist actor attacks, has not taken care of the constituents it serves or was not able to truly work for the people.

A hatred for liberal democracy sees a particular disdain and anger for the ideals which it stands for: freedoms and liberties that protect speech, a working and free press, respect and recognition of opposition, and checks and balances in the different branches of the government.

In the Philippine context, sociologist Nicole Curato explores the populist-authoritarian tendency of the Duterte administration (2016-2022). Together with Adele Webb, Curato investigates Duterte's populism in her chapter in the book, *Populism around the World* (2019). Accordingly, the appeal as to how Duterte rose to power is rooted in the Philippines' colonial history and a national subjectivity that carries lingering anxiety about freedom and sovereignty. Such a populist appeal "unsettles simplistic explanations of demagoguery, manipulation, and false consciousness. It also serves as a reminder that the legacies of the past cannot be papered over by contemporary rhetoric of universal liberal rights."⁶

Providing a homegrown philosophical framework for Philippine populism might enrich the current explorations and debates on the Duterte administration. This study now turns to Leonardo N. Mercado, a Filipino philosopher who is known for his notion of *sakop* which is mainly discussed in his work, *Elements of Filipino Philosophy* (1974) and further contextualized in his later work, *Explorations in Filipino Philosophy* (2009).

Lorenzo Bandillon presents Mercado's *sakop* as having a: (1) a hierarchic characteristic that expresses the Filipino having an "interpersonal relationship mentality to the other that leads them to call on others by a particular title of respect," and (2) an interpersonal characteristic "seen in Filipino values," that "manifests *sakop* and the

⁶ Adele Webb and Nicole Curato, "Populism in the Philippines," in *Populism around the World: A Comparative Perspective*, ed. Daniel Stockemer (Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2019), 63.

characteristics of the Filipinos, dealing with the relationship between the individual to the other members of the group.”⁷

The notion of *sakop* holds the basic assumption that the “Filipino is person-oriented” and “thinks of himself as belonging to and identifies himself with a group (*sakop*).” Because of the sense of belonging in a group, “he considers the success and welfare of the group as his fulfillment.”⁸

Sakop, with its hierarchic and interpersonal characteristics, can be seen at work in the Philippine government. Apparently, populism is explainable by the: 1) hierarchic aspect wherein the supporters view their elected official as a parent figure of their respective place which is supported by the official's assertion of being a father or mother of his or her constituents, and 2) there is also a prevalence of the interpersonal aspect of the supporters where despite being geographically separated, they can share an affinity with another supporter and even to the point of bashing other non-supporter in defense of the elected official, a reflection of defending someone in their *sakop*.

Populist-Nationalism: The Filipinos' Subconscious Yearning for Freedom

To fully understand the historical intricacies of populism in the Philippines, one must approach it through a specific lens otherwise, it would incorporate other populist-like movements at the national level. One kind of populism that resonates with the struggle of the Filipino *masa* is the one proposed by Curato and Webb: *populist nationalism*. This type of populism does not merely revolve between the people and a

⁷ Lorenzo B. Bandillon, “An Analysis of the Devotion to the Black Nazarene using Mercado's *Sakop*” (unpublished undergraduate's thesis, Saint Paul Seminary Foundation, 2018).

⁸ Leonardo N. Mercado, *Elements of Filipino Philosophy*, (Tacloban: Divine Word University Publishing, 1974), 100.

distinct elite within the country, but it invokes a wider scale of division between the Filipino people against its colonial masters and their local oligarchs and elites that continue to oppress the people.⁹ This strand of populism operates as a division between the common Filipino folks pitted against the colonial rulers who, through their local Filipino oligarchic collaborators, appear to continue to hinder the growth of the country by enforcing implicit control over the country.

The earliest instance of populist nationalism is seen in the Spanish colonial period, which is between two antagonistic group: the “good people”, personified by Filipino nationalists, often referred to as *Indios*, who only want freedom and independence from their colonial masters, and the evil other, anyone who are against the nation’s interests and autonomy, personified by Spanish aristocrats and Catholic friars, and their Filipino collaborators. While it is common to speak of colonial Spain as evil, a growing hatred against Filipino oligarchs also begins to develop at this point in Philippine history. When these local oligarchs connive with the Spanish colonizers, it also marks the beginning of a growing anti-intellectualism movement, as the *Indios* associated them with the colonizers. These oligarchs were hated since they were “Europe-educated, suit-wearing, reformist intellectuals.”¹⁰

Eventually the Filipinos would be "liberated" from Spain and then came the Americans with their acts of goodwill and emancipation, which later turned into benevolent assimilation. After the Spanish years of domination, the populist-nationalist narrative shifted to resistance against American imperialism. This shift made the *masa* espouse radical left ideology, which focused on defending “the rights and dignity of the masses against the domination and chicanery of the Filipino elite and their American sponsors.”¹¹

⁹ Webb and Curato, “Populism in the Philippines,” 51.

¹⁰ Webb and Curato, “Populism in the Philippines,” 53.

¹¹ Webb and Curato, “Populism in the Philippines,” 53.

United as a country under the banner of the Philippines, a particular number of presidents have played populist appeals during each of their terms. Manuel L. Quezon had a particular appeal leaning towards a particular authoritarianism imbued with a charismatic identity that gave him power over "both external relations with Washington and the country's volatile provincial politics"¹². Quezon had expressed "anti-colonial liberation struggles," to attack the interventions still being done by Washington to the country and being a "master of political intrigue". At the same time, he could "excite envy, distrust, ambition, jealousy, even among his loyal followers."¹³ He had skillfully maneuvered a populist appeal of liberation from the neo-colonial control of the Americans while pitting one politician against the other, most of the time the opposition and elite politicians.

Ramon Magsaysay is notable for being a man of the *masa*, even being described as a "noble populist" who "believed that social justice for the poor was doable with a clean government"¹⁴. Nevertheless, he was unable to let go of subservience to America; while he was able to get the mass's grassroots support, especially in agrarian reforms, he was pressured to "cater to the demand of anti-communist stance of the United States." In doing such, his agrarian reform program, which benefitted members of the *Hukbalahap*, transitioned into "Economic Development Corps (EDCOR) settlements in Mindanao" adjunct "to the relentless military assaults on Huk-held territories and systematic pursuit of their key leaders."¹⁵ *Mambo Magsaysay* became Uncle Sam's lackey in

¹² Alfred W. McCoy, "Global Populism: A Lineage of Filipino Strongmen from Quezon to Marcos and Duterte," *Kasarinlan: Philippine Journal of Third World Studies* 32, no. 1-2 (2017): 18, [url:https://www.journals.upd.edu.ph/index.php/kasarinlan/article/view/6330](https://www.journals.upd.edu.ph/index.php/kasarinlan/article/view/6330).

¹³ McCoy, "Global Populism," 14.

¹⁴ F. Sionil Jose, "Remembering Ramon Magsaysay," *PhilStar Global*. September 2, 2019. [url:https://www.philstar.com/opinion/2019/09/02/1948243/remembering-ramon-magsaysay](https://www.philstar.com/opinion/2019/09/02/1948243/remembering-ramon-magsaysay).

¹⁵ Faina C. Abaya-Ulindang and Lloyd B. Ranises. "Land as Central in the Struggle of Mindanawons (1950's to the present): The Role of Philippine Populist Presidents

the support of the US Containment of Communism policy, and Magsaysay's fear of its domino policy in Asia.¹⁶

Diosdado Macapagal recognized the existing status quo of the economic policies of the country and that it remains under a bond that resonates even up to the early colonial days of the Spanish. In one of his speeches, he calls for the continuation of the "unfinished revolution of Andres Bonifacio," which is seen in "the shackles of an economy beset by inimical landlord-tenant relationship"¹⁷. The continued control of this colonial master over the country proves that even if we have been liberated from Spain and other colonial masters, they still have implicit control over us, as is seen in how a landlord-tenant relationship continues to haunt the economy of the country. Even if these landlords are our fellow Filipinos, it cannot be avoided to associate them with our foreign masters; he may have broken free from being a colony of foreign powers, but we are still a neo-colony with local oligarchic masters.

Ferdinand E. Marcos Sr., on the other hand, had resorted to a populist-nationalist appeal that sees the Filipino people's sovereignty had been mocked by the "extravagant lifestyles of the political class and the lawlessness of syndicated crime."¹⁸ His inaugural speech assailed public officials who, at the same time, are unscrupulous businessmen whose actions ultimately defraud the very nature of the government by a disregard for law over activities that promote a "climate for criminality,"¹⁹ which he promised to the Filipino masses to eradicate and

Magsaysay, Estrada and Duterte, a Comparative Historical Study." (paper presentation, ERPI 2018 International Conference, International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague, Netherlands, March 17-18, 2018), 4.

¹⁶ Abaya-Ulindang and Ranises, "Land as Central in the Struggle," 7.

¹⁷ Diosdado Macapagal, "Speech of President Macapagal at the Bonifacio Centenary Ceremonies." *Official Gazette* (November 30, 1963): [url:https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/1963/11/30/speech-of-president-macapagal-at-the-bonifacio-centenary-ceremonies/](https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/1963/11/30/speech-of-president-macapagal-at-the-bonifacio-centenary-ceremonies/)

¹⁸ Webb and Curato, "Populism in the Philippines," 53.

¹⁹ Ferdinand Marcos, "Inaugural Address of President Marcos, December 30, 1965." *Official Gazette* (December 30, 1965)

push to make the Philippines a great country. He was the proponent of propaganda of a true Filipino ideology, which was a *revolution from the center*.²⁰

With Marcos' populist appeal decaying into outright authoritarianism, massive popular sentiment led to the deposition of the strongman and the revolutionary-installed figure of Filipino democracy, Corazon Aquino. Her rise to power reflects the dependence on people's power, tracing her coming to power through "extra-parliamentary means on the back of a military but largely spontaneous people's movement."²¹ While her **populist appeal** centered on a moralist appeal to reform the government, promising "honesty, sincerity, simplicity and religious faith,"²² she was seen as the personification of the mother of the nation, "*Inang Bayan*", representing the "aspiration for independence and justice."²³ Once in power, Aquino's promised reforms were found to be harder to implement brought by "political machines, personalistic factionalism, patron-client ties, old-elite family

url:<https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/1965/12/30/inaugural-address-of-president-marcos-december-30-1965>.

²⁰ This revolution from the center drives a particular appeal to counter the prevalent leftist calls for a revolution in the country during his time. Marcos' Filipino Ideology works with the core idea that "government is not above the people but in the center of their lives as a national society," and everything he does while in the office is for the benefit of the people. Towards an overhaul towards a "new society", he was supposed to repudiate the external ideology present in the country: the liberal democracy handed over by the Americans, but instead, he became corrupted. Instead of fulfilling the reforms promised, he focused more on staying in power, through the imposition of Martial Law. Of course, the masses would reach their breaking point, go out to EDSA, and end up overthrowing the dictator. Ferdinand Marcos, "Essay by President Marcos Entitled "The True Filipino Ideology." *Official Gazette* (May 12, 1982): url:<https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/1982/05/12/essay-by-president-marcos-entitled-the-true-filipino-ideology>.

²¹ Walden Bello, "Aquino's Elite Populism: Initial Reflections," *Third World Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (July 1986):1020, doi:10.1080/01436598608419935.

²² Mark R. Thompson, "Populism and the Revival of Reform: Competing Political Narratives in the Philippines," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 32, no. 1 (April 2010): 8, url:<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41288801>.

²³ Mark R. Thompson, "Presidentas and People Power in Comparative Asian Perspective," *Philippine Political Science Journal* 28, no. 51 (2007): 9, doi:10.1080/01154451.2007.9723500

prominence, vote buying, ballot tampering, and violence in the 1988, 1990, and 1992 elections.”²⁴

Two administrations later, the resurgence of the utilization of populist appeal is seen in Joseph “Erap” Estrada's electoral victory and administration. Estrada's election is an effect of the popular election brought about by Estrada's fame and popularity seen in how Estrada was seen by the Filipino masses as a hero, framed in a character that “depicted the typical third-world hero of the oppressed, the underdog, and the underprivileged” which led to a stunning image of being a “defender of the poor.”²⁵ One can note that the Filipino *masa* threw their all-out support to Estrada because of a particular politics of sincerity he shows them. Estrada is empathetic towards the poor “beyond electoral consideration”. His lower-class supporters described him as a good politician in comparison to other politicians, in a political logic that equates support to Estrada with how he treated his supporters.²⁶ Even when Estrada was convicted of corruption, the poor continues to support him. For the *masa*, the attacks hurled towards Estrada are created by his political opponents and the opposition brought by Estrada supporting the poor or being uneducated and lacking social finesse. In a sense, the attacks on Estrada were an attack on the poor people.²⁷

Estrada was supported by the Filipino masses in his framing as “the Estrada hero, the rebel with a cause, fighting for the underdog and for what he believes in, fighting against the pressures from a harsh, cruel

²⁴ Thompson, “Populism and the Revival,” 8.

²⁵ Alfredo P. Co, “Media and Communication Technology and the Pitfalls of Modern Populism: The Case of the Impeachment Trial of Ex-President Joseph Ejercito Estrada of the Republic of the Philippines.” *Karunungan* 18 (2001): 31.

²⁶ Marco Garrido, “Why the Poor Support Populism: The Politics of Sincerity in Metro Manila,” *American Journal of Sociology* 123 no. 3 (2017): 679–680, doi:10.1086/694076.

²⁷ Garrido, “Why the Poor Support,” 678.

world" in many movies that he starred in.²⁸ The exposure Estrada had while playing roles in movies, that mirrored current social experiences gave his supporters the assumption that what he had played in movies and television shows he could replicate in the Philippine society.

The short history of Philippine politics points to a long-standing yearning of the Filipino *masa* to be liberated from what they perceive as enemies to progress and their enemies from poverty alleviation. Populist nationalism would create a preliminary assumption that the strand of populism in the country is identified by the antagonistic relationship between the *indios* (and later the Filipino *masa*) against foreign colonizers who are in alliance with local Philippine elites. This is precisely the yearning that was utilized by Duterte in his landslide victory during the 2016 Presidential Elections.

Tatay Digong, Atin 'to: Duterte as a Populist and his Populist Publics

At the national level, the masses are seen to support politicians who display populist appeals during the electoral period after presidents who focused on a more reformist stance, have sped up the economic growth of the country, but failed to make the reforms trickle down to the masses. This is seen in the cases of Corazon Aquino's administration who an average of +63 net rating average in 1986 and plummeting to a +10 net rating average in 1992, and in Estrada's administration which began with an average of +61 net rating average in 1998 and ending in +12 net rating average in 2000.²⁹ swing between reformists and populists in national

²⁸ Eva-Lotta E. Hedman, "The Spectre of Populism in Philippine Politics and Society: *Artista, Masa, Eruption!*" *South East Asia Research* 9, no. 1 (2001): 30, doi:10.5367/000000001101297306.

²⁹ Social Weather Stations, "Fourth Quarter 2022 Social Weather Survey: Pres. Ferdinand Marcos, Jr.'s net satisfaction rating at +68," *Social Weather Stations*, <https://www.sws.org.ph/swsmain/artclisppage/?artcsyscode=ART-20230214092648>.

Philippine politics has been much highlighted in what can be considered as a “protest vote” in the 2016 election which was,

a negation of Aquino’s negation (*Moralpolitik*) by promising competent, decisive, and inclusive leadership. And as he stepped into office, Duterte began to shake up the status quo, challenging the ideological hegemony of the ruling elite and their century-old tradition of American-leaning foreign policy.³⁰

Rappler, in partnership with Laylo Research Strategies, conducted a pre-election SMS survey in January 2016. Duterte led the survey, garnering 35% of respondents supporting him. 37% of class ABC supported Duterte, 35% from class D, and 34% from class E. From gender, 37% of males support Duterte, while 33% of female respondents support his candidacy. In age groups, Duterte supporters formed 34% of 18-34 years old respondents, 37% of those belonging in 35-54 years old, and 31% in the 55 & older age group.³¹ The voter preference according to major areas also spoke of the far reach that Duterte’s appeal has created. In NCR, he garnered 31% of respondents, in South Luzon/Bicol 26%, 39% in the Visayas, and an overwhelming 59% from Mindanao, it is only in North/Central Luzon where Binay led the survey at 25% while Duterte came in second at 23%.³²

In Duterte's populist appeal, he had appealed virtually to several Filipino socioeconomic classes and regions, with his campaign promises

³⁰ Richard Javad Heydarian, *The Rise of Duterte: A Populist Revolt Against Elite Democracy* (Singapore: Palgrave Pivot Imprint Published by Springer Nature, 2018), 36.

³¹ Rappler.com, “Rappler January SMS poll: Duterte has ‘most engaged’ followers,” *Rappler*, February 18, 2016, <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/122650-rappler-sms-poll-january-results-duterte>.

³² Rappler.com, “Rappler’s January text poll: Bailiwicks of Duterte, Binay, Roxas,” *Rappler*, February 20, 2016, <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/122820-january-sms-poll-regional-bailiwicks>.

that are tailor-fitted to each of their needs. For one class, he promised security and justice, to another urban planning, and of course, for the masses' he "promised a caring, humble, and accessible form of governance," which is rooted in the masses being hooked on Duterte's "spontaneous story-telling style and folksy image."³³

With the previous administration's utilization of decent politics and the constant framing of the *Daang Matuwid*, the Filipino masses saw hypocrisy when the administration began to attempt a demolition job against Duterte. That brought the downfall of their rule, that despite the 'moral' methods of achieving what will be beneficial for the masses, it will not result in quick and apparent results. Bonnet describes Duterte as having built an electoral campaign on "an unorthodox program to eradicate criminal activities, particularly drug-related ones, and to restore security within three to six months," and numerous more promises with our "catalog of heterogeneous measures" that enabled Duterte to "'cast a wide net and to speak to all classes of society."³⁴ Rightly so, Duterte promised the general populace to rid the Philippines of the menace of drugs which he considered the root of the problem in the country.

Duterte's supporters are characterized by Nicole Curato³⁵ and Cleve Arguelles³⁶ as a revolt against the elite politicians brought by the

³³ Heydarian, *The Rise of Duterte*, 35 – 36.

³⁴ François-Xavier Bonnet, "Portrait of Rodrigo Duterte - President of The Philippines," *Institut Montaigne*, December 21, 2018, [url:https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/blog/portrait-rodrigo-duterte-president-philippines](https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/blog/portrait-rodrigo-duterte-president-philippines).

³⁵ Curato's analysis sees the Filipino *masa's* support stemming from a repudiation of politicians who do not fulfill electoral promises. They perceive Duterte as different as he gives voice to the sufferings the people had experienced making him their mouthpiece. In doing such, Duterte can divide the people between pure, decent people, against a corrupt, evil other. Nicole Curato, "Populist Publics," in *Democracy in A Time of Misery: From Spectacular Tragedies to Deliberative Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019): 116-142.

³⁶ Arguelles, offers a similar idealization of populist support for Duterte, seeing Duterte as a real politician that would deliver his promises. This comes from being a mayor of a local government, living life near to his constituents, and thus assuming that once elected, he can do so much for the people. Of course, Arguelles continues the populist

masses' negative experiences and unfulfilled promises from *trapos*, support for a person that the masses related to, his division between the good people against a dangerous other.

It appears that Duterte's populism is not just rooted in his populist rhetoric but also in the massive support that the populist public gives him. Apparently, in his strong political will, he has used a rugged strongman figure. In this populist rhetoric comes out his hypermasculinity, wherein,

he stands as the toughie ready to fight, kill or die. He is a confessed womanizer and proud of it. He disdains formalities, is irreverent, speaks with a thick regional accent, and is *palamura* (given to profanity). His entrance into the national political stage had a refreshing impact on the electorate. The persona appealed to the public and, in fact, his support cuts across classes. His populist appeal hinged on his "flaws". They rendered a total picture of Duterte as authentic to the public as opposed to the hypocrisy of the "refined" and "decent" traditional politicians in the Philippines.³⁷

This hypermasculinity Duterte displays, coupled with the penal populism³⁸ he employs in his massive crackdown against crime and

divide by recognizing an oppressed Filipino people pitted against the dangerous and even dehumanized drug addicts, the elite yellow, and even the Philippine Left movement. Cleve V. Arguelles, "'We Are Rodrigo Duterte': Dimensions of the Philippine Populist Publics' Vote," *Asian Politics & Policy* 11, no. 3 (2019): 417-437, doi:10.1111/aspp.12472.

³⁷ Filomin Gutierrez, "Focus: Duterte and Penal Populism – The Hypermasculinity of Crime Control in the Philippines," *Discover Society*, August 1, 2017, url: <https://discoversociety.org/2017/08/02/focus-duterte-and-penal-populism-the-hypermasculinity-of-crime-control-in-the-philippines/>.

³⁸ This is another strand of populism that divides a nation between the 'good citizens' and the 'dangerous others' and in turn, takes harsher mechanisms for social control to be tough on crime. See Nicole Curato, "Politics of Anxiety, Politics of Hope: Penal

criminality, has resonated so much with his supporters because of the latent anxieties the masses have possessed. Duterte has managed to harness these worries and troubles that in viewing Duterte's actions, his supporters appear to have projected Duterte as the father of the nation.

Populists around the world tend to portray themselves as strong, masculine leaders and contrast their enemies as weak and feminine images. Most utilize the father of the nation image; others express their masculinity through their framing in media and popular culture. In discrediting the opposition, these populists would resort to "feminizing their enemies," and [ridiculing] their critics as physically weak, gay, too emotional, or even sexually repressed."³⁹

In framing Duterte as a populist who appeals to strong paternalistic tendencies, one can take note of Duterte "constructing an image of a benevolent patriarch (*Daddy Digong*) who cares deeply for his people, unlike the detached and callous technocrats that governed before him."⁴⁰

He is also seen to perform "the role of a strongman and protector, a father (*Tatay Digong*) who knows what is best for the nation." In his weekly live address, people can see him wearing a polo shirt and *maong* pants in contrast to the elite and decent formal wear which attempts to frame him as a father who does not like the spectacular and pompous show of clothes. His language and choice of words in public functions have also been labeled as "free-flowing commentary peppered with

Populism and Duterte's Rise to Power," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 35, no. 3 (2016): 91-109, doi:10.1177/186810341603500305.

³⁹ Cleve V. Arguelles and Clio C. Pantaleon, "Unholy Alliance? Ordinary Religious Christian Women's Responses to Rodrigo Duterte's Gendered Populism," *Review of Women's Studies* 29, no. 2 (2020): 90.

⁴⁰ Sharmila Parmanand, "Duterte as the Macho Messiah: Chauvinist Populism and the Feminisation of Human Rights in the Philippines," *Review of Women's Studies* 29, no. 2 (2020): 23.

cusswords, as though having a drink with his mates at the corner store"⁴¹ rather than reading a prepared speech. He gives himself a framing of a hypermasculine figure and begins to assume his presidential responsibilities in a manner depicting him as the father of the nation. This *Tatay Digong* narrative also revolves around the "popularity of the nation-as-family metaphor, with *Tatay Digong* (as he is fondly called by his supporters) seen as the strict father, who needs to punish truant children, for their good."⁴²

To sum up this part of the discussion, the historical context of politics in the Philippines has led to the rise of populist nationalism as the prevailing strand of populism in the country. As different colonizers subjugated the country, they placed upon its people longing for independence from foreign powers and to stand upon its national sovereignty. Challenging the status quo of the foreigners, it has been divided between the group of 'pure Filipino people' against a group of 'evil colonial masters' conniving with the local Filipino oligarchy that appears to support these lords rather than their fellow Filipino. Several presidents have attempted to continue this narrative by assuming the role of the representative of the Filipino masses and articulating a fight against a foreign power and their local puppets. Duterte, in his attempt to use this narrative, has further made it more plausible by further creating a divide between a good citizenry and the dangerous other. His framing of a dangerous other has led to the vocal support of the majority of Filipino for his drug war: the drug addicts have become dehumanized and are now mere dangerous others that deserve no compassion in their punishment. The punishment is done in the guise of Duterte being a father of the nation.

⁴¹ John Andrew G. Evangelista, "Queering Rodrigo Duterte," In *A Duterte Reader: Critical Essays on Rodrigo Duterte's Early Presidency*, ed. Nicole Curato (Quezon City: Ateneo De Manila University Press, 2017): 251-262, 256 - 257.

⁴² Parmanand, "Duterte as the Macho Messiah," 18.

Others have already pointed out the notion of the nation as a big family. American author George Lakoff, in his book, *Moral Politics* (1996) devoted a chapter on the *Strict Father Morality*. This kind of morality relates a family dynamic of a strong, dominant “father” (the government) would find it necessary to discipline and punish his “children” (citizens) in order to become responsible adults. It is assumed that the exercise of authority is moral since “it is moral to reward obedience and punish disobedience.”⁴³ Bautista, in his analysis of Marcosian historical revisionism recurses to Lacan and Žižek’s psychoanalysis of fantasy and perversion, point to the “worldplays with the terms Name-of-the-Father” which are “prohibition (no of the father), the conferring of identity (nom or name of the father), and père-version (or version of the father),” while being applied to Marcos, this can also be applied in Duterte where it “castigates any form of dissent as lack of discipline, installs a matrix of identity between disciplined followers and “pasaway” lawbreakers, and propagates a distorted version of reality.”⁴⁴

With how the supporters of Duterte endearingly see him as a father of the nation, it has now become a big macrocosm of a Filipino family. The Filipino family as a microcosm of *sakop* would pave the way for the possibility of understanding Filipino populism under the Duterte administration through Mercado’s *sakop*.

From the Family to Society: Mercado’s *Sakop*

One of the well-defined, yet underappreciated philosophical concepts that Mercado has explicated is his concept of *sakop*, which may

⁴³ George Lakoff, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

⁴⁴ Victor Felipe Bautista, “The Pervert’s Guide to Historical Revisionism: Traversing the Marcos Fantasy,” *Philippines Studies* 66, no. 3 (September 2018): 283, doi: 10.1353/phs.2018.0026.

also be considered as a kind of Filipino group dynamics. In his discussion on *sakop* in his landmark work *Elements of Filipino Philosophy*, Mercado emphasizes that the notion reflects the Filipino's view of himself as an individual as can be seen in the *loob*. The metalinguistic analysis and phenomenology of behavior of *loob* exposes the idea of the Filipino and is unlike certain dichotomizations of the human person. On the contrary it is a holistic view of the self and basically a response to the need of being in harmony with the self. The Filipino then views himself holistically; his interior self-being is manifested externally.

The Filipino idea and practice of *sakop* expresses the Filipino attitude and perspective towards harmony. It is a harmony of the self and others, which is aligned to the need to be in harmony with oneself. Accordingly, "he thinks of himself as belonging to, and identifies himself with a group (*sakop*)," and because of the sense of belonging in a group, "he considers the success and welfare of the group as his fulfillment."⁴⁵

Sakop is seen in how Filipinos talk. Referring to third persons, the plural of third persons has two forms, one excluding the person while the other includes all, reduplication of singular pronouns gives an egoistic feel while the reduplication of plural pronouns connoted cordial, informal, and interpersonal relationships. A particular interpersonal sense also arises when the person is referred to as a sort of representative of the group referred to. The family, as a *sakop*, involves the idea of kinship, wherein in a family, there is a hierarchy of seniority rather than gender. This hierarchic view is an expression of authority, seen in a parent-child relationship, and older sibling-younger sibling relationships.⁴⁶ The family as a microcosm of *sakop* sees Philippine society as a bigger *sakop*. While there exists "ranking and seniority with corresponding authority exists in the family,"⁴⁷ this sees a particular

⁴⁵ Mercado, *Elements of Filipino Philosophy*, 100.

⁴⁶ Mercado, *Elements of Filipino Philosophy*, 92 – 93.

⁴⁷ Mercado, *Elements of Filipino Philosophy*, 95.

encroachment into Philippine society, as well. Particularly, titles and reference terms also hold the value of authority in the *sakop* orientation. The Filipino family values “authoritarianism, respect for hierarchic authority, communitarianism, and interpersonalism,” and in turn are reflected in the macrocosm of Philippine society.⁴⁸ Kinship terms become part of the political life in society when officials are referred to terms of endearments that are supposedly only for familial ties: It becomes political once these terms are attributed to government officials they respect and attempt to replicate the respect for authority they have for their family members to these members of the government.

The “authoritarian and hierarchic” nature of *sakop* is seen in the “nuclear *sakop*”, the family in terms of the ranking of siblings by age, the authority of the older sibling towards the younger ones, and the need for respect towards the elderly. There is also the element of intermediaries present in the hierarchic nature of *sakop*, wherein there is a need to use go-betweens to intercede for them on their behalf.⁴⁹ In addition, respect is found in the use of honorific titles of respect towards parents (*po/opo*) and toward elder siblings (*manong/manang, manoy/manay, kuya/ate*).⁵⁰

Another characteristic of the *sakop* is the tendency of describing its members through bodily terms. This is rampant in the political *sakop*, where the representative is referred to as the *kinatawan*, the mayor or president as *pangulo*, the right-hand man as the *kanang-kamay*, and the personnel as the *galamay*.⁵¹

As Mercado's writing flourished, he recognized two traits that characterize *sakop*: an interpersonal dimension and a hierarchic dimension. The interpersonal aspect is reflected in the numerous

⁴⁸ Mercado, *Elements of Filipino Philosophy*, 98.

⁴⁹ Leonardo N. Mercado, *Elements of Filipino Theology* (Tacloban City: Divine Word University Publication, 1975): 50 – 66, 56 – 57.

⁵⁰ Mercado, *Elements of Filipino Theology*, 142.

⁵¹ Mercado, *Elements of Filipino Theology*, 57.

personalized relationships seen in Filipino society: the *compadrazgo* system⁵², the *suki* system, in a politician-voters relationship, and even the landlord-peasant relationship.⁵³ On the other hand, the hierarchic side of *sakop* is already well-explained in the earlier section concerning the familial *sakop*.

Mercado has recognized that the interpersonal aspect of *sakop* is reflected in the characteristics of *pakikipagkapwa* listed by Virgilio Enriquez in his clustering of how a Filipino relates with his *kapwa*: *pakikitungo* (civility), *pakikisalamuha* (mingling), *pakikilahok* (participating), *pakikibagay* (conforming), *pakikisama* (being united with the group), *pakikipagpalagayang-loob* (mutual trust), and *pakikisangot* (getting involved).⁵⁴

For the hierarchic side of *sakop*, one can take into consideration the *sakop* situation of personnel management vis-à-vis social philosophy. Apparently, in a microcosm of personnel management in a business, a group of Filipino would always look at a certain person to lead them, or in this case, they expect their manager to have a father-son relationship between them and their manager, which will result in viewing their manager as a providing father to his group of that may need nourishment. The manager must also have a charismatic appeal of a father that can be able to command his men, treat them equally and keep them closely knit, if, in case of neglecting a member, it could lead to him being deserted by his group.⁵⁵ In application to the national elections, a study was conducted in four barrios in the Philippines, which resulted in the people viewing "the presidential candidates" not "in terms of their

⁵² This system is an alliance-making tool between one powerful clan to another clan; always at the notion of the powerful person is my *compadre*. Mercado, *Elements of Filipino Philosophy*, 97.

⁵³ Leonardo N. Mercado, *Explorations in Filipino Philosophy* (Manila: Logos Publications, 2009), 36.

⁵⁴ Mercado, *Explorations in Filipino Philosophy*, 121.

⁵⁵ Leonardo N. Mercado, *Applied Filipino Philosophy* (Tacloban City: Divine Word University Publication, 1977), 44.

party platforms but in terms of their images as fathers," or in a sense, these people reflect a political *sakop* that reflects the characteristics of a familial *sakop*, that by viewing the politician as a father, they recognize the government as a big family.⁵⁶

Moreover, this resonates with the psychology of leadership in local sects in Mercado's commentary. Since the political *sakop* appears to display the familial framework of *sakop*, it was also attempted to see the characteristics of charismatic leaders of local sects in the Philippines. Mercado noted the following qualities: (1) a father being strict or authoritarian at home, he must also be in religious organizations, (2) his authoritarian tendency, which leads to the organization to be highly centralized, and (3) his infallibility is what leads him to be unquestioned, under the guise of parents knowing the best for their children, and (4) the benevolence of a father should be holistic, that is encompassing life in all its aspects.⁵⁷ Brought by the holistic tendency of the Filipino, they also expect this type of leadership to be extended to other fields in society: the economic, social, and even cultural spheres.

Taking note of the distinction of *sakop* as interpersonal and hierarchical, the assumption can be made that brought by these characteristics; the Filipino man is capable of supporting strongmen and authoritarian leaders in politics because they rely on the hierarchical dimension of *sakop*. It is embedded in the Filipino mind that in a group, a strong, paternalistic figure should lead them, and this leader should possess characteristics expected of a benevolent Filipino father towards his children.

⁵⁶ Mercado, *Applied Filipino Philosophy*, 46.

⁵⁷ Leonardo N. Mercado, *Filipino Religious Psychology* (Tacloban City: Divine Word University Publication, 1977), 186.

Filipino Populism, the Duterte Administration, and Sakop

Finally, to make sense of Duterte's populism in light of Mercado's *sakop*, the characteristics of Duterte's populism will be analyzed and categorized under Mercado's *sakop*.

Earlier, Curato and Arguelles mentioned three characteristics of how Duterte's supporters relate to him⁵⁸ Arguelles added one more that resonates presently with Duterte's supporters—that is Duterte being seen as a father-figure where who has “a capacity to “overcome rules” to implement his plans,”⁵⁹ or an enduring political will that is needed so that real change can be felt all around society. The conception of a father, for the Filipino, speaks of the need to be authoritarian and be in control for the sake of the betterment of the family. Both the data gathered by Curato and Arguelles express patterns of thoughts of the Diehard Duterte Supporters concerning their continued dependence on Duterte. Further, these characteristics speak of the inherent populist nationalism embedded subconsciously in the Filipino mind. It always revolves around the idea that Duterte is one of the masses and represents their needs and wants.

From an ethnolinguistic perspective of the perception of Duterte as one of the masses, most of the votes that landed him in Malacañang are brought by the support from his fellow Bisaya people and the Moros of Mindanao. This reflects support for a candidate that is not an elite and not from "*Imperial Manila*" but is from the often unrecognized and underappreciated island of Mindanao. Often framed as a warzone and backward, the people of Mindanao, and their ethnolinguistic relatives from the Visayas, have finally been given a chance to challenge the prevailing status quo of Imperial Manila by their election of the Mayor of Davao into the highest position in the country.

⁵⁸ See footnotes 27 and 28.

⁵⁹ Arguelles, “We are Rodrigo Duterte,” 430.

Other than Curato, ethnographic analysis of Duterte's supporters reveals that Duterte's brand of populism revolves around his charisma and a mixture of penal populism. I contend that there is heavy usage of the populist appeal of othering, especially in the context of Duterte's DDS pitting against the *Dilawan/Durogista/Komunista*. In being the DDS' representative, he has already framed himself to resonate with the ordinary people rather than with the elite and the *trapos*. However, more so, this is not merely associating himself with ordinary people. However, a framing of himself as a father of the nation is evident in his supporters when they refer to him as *Tatay Digong*.

The *Tatay Digong* narrative shows that the respect they have for Duterte is as high as the respect that they give to their parents, and it could also be that his supporters are willing to give him the right to discipline and punish them the way a father does to his children. Still, they will remain respectful of their father. I see this perception of Filipino people as highly familial oriented, which is why I contend that the populism Duterte employs in the country is not merely a 'we-against-other' dichotomy but is supported by the Filipino family orientation.

The DDS as a *sakop* has a high resonance with the values of *pakikipagkapwa*, which explains the interpersonal side. They are very much abstracted into the group of supporters of Duterte. The group of supporters are not recognized by their names, their status in life, and not even by their genders: they are Rodrigo Duterte, they are Diehard Duterte Supporters, and the group's reference person is always Duterte.

The hierarchical side of *sakop* takes its root in the assumption that the center of Filipino social life is the family. Each parent has a role, the mother; exemplifies goodness, the core of morality, and epitomizes the moral hierarchy. The more distant – often authoritarian – father represents another aspect, namely, the reputation of the family.

The hierarchic characteristic of Duterte's *sakop* is very much seen in the tendency of the DDSs to refer to Duterte as *Tatay*, Bong Go, and Bato dela Rosa as *Kuya*, and even Imee Marcos and Sara Duterte were endeared as *Ate*. This implies that Duterte's *sakop* is heavily influenced by the Filipino's tendency to extend the *sakop* of the nuclear family to society. The Filipino family's tendency to value authority between parents and children and between the ranks of children has been espoused in the country's political organization.

Duterte's *sakop* is formed with the interplay of Filipino values that are aimed at fostering smooth interpersonal relationships. A feeling of exclusivity arises from Duterte's *sakop*, as can be characterized as the people who support Duterte because they think that they are benefitting from what his administration projects as undertakings done under his administration. Much gratitude is given toward Duterte from his *sakop* as the members feel uplifted and think that Duterte is doing what he had promised during his electoral campaign.

Another element of the interpersonalistic tendency of *sakop* is highlighted in the members' interaction with one another. They are not anymore looking at their gains but see the success of Duterte as the *sakop*'s success. Influential DDS' have been regarded as reliable sources of opinion for the DDS, despite their flawed arguments and engaging in debates that would ultimately end in ad hominem attacks. Even if their arguments are mostly fallacious, when faced with someone offering well-versed arguments, the DDS' *sakop* would just flock together and gang up on the opposing person, and instead of engaging in healthy debates, they would personally attack the person and even threaten them. Once the opposing person stops responding, they would take it as a victory for their *sakop*, a victory in defending their *Tatay Digong*. More than Duterte's *sakop* as a group of Filipino who support Duterte, it can be noted this support does not only stem from the *masa*'s dissatisfaction with the long years of having elite politicians rule at the helm of the government, who

would make numerous promises and lay platforms that would help alleviate poverty for the Filipino masses, but once elected, would turn against their promises and railroad bills and laws that would only benefit the rich oligarchs and their colonizer masters. This support is more of a deep-seated feeling and longing for freedom, and it can also be seen as unconscious and repressed anti-colonial sentiments that, with the help of Duterte, finally bursts out of repression and found their way to the elections. The 2016 election has been monumental for a protest vote, were among the elite and decent candidates who promise to alleviate them from poverty, they had chosen a candidate who is one of them. The hope for liberation and redemption from a subconscious feeling of anti-colonialism carried over from centuries has manifested itself and broke free. The masses have chosen what they thought was freedom from colonial masters and their oligarchic and elite lackeys.

Conclusion

This research asserted that Filipino populism under the Duterte administration is anchored in a dichotomization between a 'pure Filipino people' against 'evil colonial masters' who connive with their local elite cronies and in the Duterte administration is partnered with a further division between good citizens and a dangerous other. Moreover, the existence of this dichotomization is deeply embedded in the subconscious Filipino mind that, from the beginning of politics in the country, has been under different colonial masters and local oligarchy lackeys that continue to uphold a status quo that keeps the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer.

Nevertheless, Duterte's politics may not represent the whole of Philippine politics, using Mercado's *sakop* is an attempt at a cultural-philosophical lens in understanding the populist appeal of *Tatay Digong* towards his Diehard Duterte Supporters [DDS]. The interpersonal and

hierarchical dimensions of *sakop* are deeply ingrained in the Filipino *masa*, and can influence political behavior and preferences, with the tendency to support populist leaders with authoritarian tendencies.

Although there was massive support for Duterte and his political style, not all Filipinos were in favor of his methods and governance. The Philippines is home to numerous political beliefs and ideologies and Duterte's politics, and the support he has, is just one of them. It must be stated that fairly speaking, Duterte and his supporters do not completely define the entirety of Philippine politics.

Sakop and how it influences Philippine politics is never a deterministic one; it does not mean that the country will always have populist leaders with authoritarian tendencies to govern it. The political landscape can, and will, change over time with factors involving economic conditions, education, international influences, and even civil society movements. While Duterte's populist politics can be understood by looking at it as a macrocosm of the Filipino familial *sakop*. It is a piece of a much larger, complex puzzle that is Philippine society and politics.

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