

**CONVERSATIONS ON THE CURRENT AND FUTURE
STATE OF CIRCULATION OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL
KNOWLEDGE IN THE PHILIPPINES**

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*What anthropology is
worth doing and how
can it be done in our
context and time?*

Introduction

Inspired by the *dap-ay*, the enduring tradition of community dialogue in the highlands of the Mountain Province (cf. Pacyaya and Eggan 1953, Scott 1958, Bayang & Scott 1974, Bacwaden 1997), the Dap-ay conversation at the 37th UGAT Annual Conference brought together practitioners of anthropology of diverse ages, from various areas of scholarship, and divergent fields of engagement. The community Dap-ay, which one of the participants described as metaphor for ‘the web of life,’ serves as a structure for the circulation of ideas and also provides a democratic process that integrates the interests of the individual and the well-being of the community.

Contemporary Filipino anthropology has expanded, circulating the knowledge it offers wider afield in Philippine socio-political and economic life in ways that astonish and unsettle. The Dap-ay conversation opened our collective attention to the new configurations of the texture of Filipino anthropology in ways that astonishes and unsettles. Filipino Anthropology, the anthropology of and in the Philippines, is substantively diverse and expanding. This diversity is embodied in the growing array of practitioners breaking new grounds of anthropological practice, epistemology, and ontology.

Filipino anthropology is expanding as many of its practitioners trailblaze their way into cutting edge terrains of anthropological inquiry and

involvement— beyond fieldwork in upland indigenous communities and coastal Moro enclaves that had been the traditional but enduring subject of anthropological study in the Philippines. These engagements have expanded into arenas or settings as diverse as corporate boardrooms, industries that brand products and ideas for mass consumption, public communications, opinion writing, militant advocacies, designing social solutions for the underprivileged in an entrepreneurial way, digging archaeological pits for science while working with local power holders for the ends of heritage management, and so forth.

Seven anthropologists, namely Michael Tan, Rosario de Santos, Mary Racelis, Augusto Gatmaytan, Mylene Lising, Gayia Beyer, and Pamela Cajilig, led the *Dap-ay* wherein they discussed a broad knowledge of the variant terms of their respective anthropological terms, and also a view of current practices that are yet to be named. The essential viewpoints of the discussants may be summarized as follows:

Michael Tan, who also serves as the Chancellor of the University of the Philippines, calls his engaged practice a form of *public anthropology*. This kind of anthropology is represented by practitioners who recognize the “value of everywhere” as a public sphere. All spheres serve as spaces by which anthropologists take part in exposing dire circumstances of fellow persons to the greater arena of political discourse as a way to move people into action.

Rosario de Santos took us to the world of *engaged anthropology*, a dynamic community of anthropological practice that covers working for community development, addressing issues such as child labor, advocating for women’s development and deliverance from exploitative workplaces and circumstances, and even organizing or heading labor unions.

Mary Racelis offered another way of doing engaged anthropology with the special task of working with the marginalised not as a detached scholar but fully involved in taking action against suffering, disadvantages, and oppression without losing sight of the fact that the sufferer, the disadvantaged, and the oppressed, do have agency, the capacity to aspire for and find joy in life.

Augusto Gatmaytan offered no term for his long-standing and evolving work as a lawyer working for indigenous rights through a non-government organization (NGO). He later questioned how the NGO emerges as by itself an institution of power given its hierarchical relations with the community, creating its own sphere of hegemony. He, nonetheless, carried on as an

anthropologically-informed community organizer in conflict and insurgency-implicated zones, and recently as an academic with an eye towards advocating for policy with potential to significantly transform indigenous peoples' lives beyond the confines of their village.

Mylene Lising, an archeologist working on the management of archeological resources for cultural heritage applications and travelling museums, would find herself thrust in the complex art of dealing with Kalashnikov-armed men and resisting interest groups in the archeological site, and then educating corporate leaders in high social circles as well as journalists on the value of ancient bone fragments, old pottery, and an array of dusty artifacts.

Gayia Beyer took *applied anthropology* to the world of corporate product branding but with the clear eye of knowing that each consumer item has a web of significance to the individual in ways that help define the value of our common humanity. Here, however, Beyer would admit that she treads delicate ground, with other anthropologists uncomfortably raising the question of whether such an anthropological practice has 'sold out' anthropology.

Pamela Cajilig offers yet again another way, of doing *design anthropology* by reconfiguring market research and design not as a consumer item but as a 'social moral practice.' Her practice broke new grounds that did not exclusively favor business but allowed new ways of imagining relevant, sensitive, and appropriate housing, infrastructures, and services for communities ravaged by disasters, community hospitals and clinics, and other public items. Such approach, however is not without concerns as it also raises uncomfortable issues of accountability, ethics, disclosure, and the conflict of interest of research expediency and integrity, urgency vs. thoroughness, and individual rights vs. corporate client objectives.

These presentations of engagement were further discussed in the course of the Dap-ay conversation, transcribed excerpts of which are presented below.

The Dap-ay conversation

Mary Racelis: I think basically you have many publics and you have to react to which are the ones that are the most at a particular time. And usually the reference is the people whom you're working with in a very specific area. I've been focused very much on *urban poor* community because that has been the basis of much of my study and involvement and of course it connects also with women. I've (acted) in reproductive health centers, bringing women's perspective in urban poor neighborhoods, to

see why it was important for them to have access to services. Basically, you have to decide. You participate, like I did in the National Housing Summit, to make sure that voices are raised. And we make sure that the POs [people's organizations], who are very well represented there, speak for themselves – supported by NGO's to help them package and then organize ways how they can present – ... legitimizing their presence there with authorities who usually don't listen to people's roots.

When academics like us, and others, say, “No, they have to be there.” You will never understand the problem of informal settlers. And then you talk to those poor informal settlers and see why they are the way they are. So you operate in policy circles. You have to write; and I don't really like to write long. ... for this circle of professional journalism, maybe it gets us focused. For me at my age – I'm getting old (like 64 is the new 44 cause 84 is the new 64) - but I don't really care about writing for international things. I really want to write for the local publications, but [especially those] which has a social science perspective, drawing from my experience with communities but putting the framework in a more popular way, not too academic, finding a new way of relating.

When they were evicting people – supposedly for their own good – after typhoon Ondoy, I wrote a lot of articles in the *Inquirer* to say, “change the paradigm, because of ___ , and so on, for all those reasons.” I think you have to look at many publics. You have to ‘operate’. You have to be there. They have to know you and know what you can deliver; and though they invite you to speak... you have to know how to adjust, to (do) what you think you can, (to) enhance their understanding of (the) situation of your report, in the many, many publics.

Pamela Cajilig: I had a very short-lived column at *Rappler* called “Thinking Through Design” but it only lasted for a couple of months *kasi nga* my view of design is very populist and everyday and my editor was of the very elitist *Men's Wear* cover ... so *hindi kami nagkaroon ng* alignment. So I gave up on that. Instead, I agree with Dr. Mary *na* you have “to be in”, you have to attend to many publics, you have to be in policy circles, and in these circles there are many different kinds of experts and you need to know how to engage them like: How do you engage engineers? How do you engage doctors? And the knowledge, anthropological knowledge, comes in handy in how to engage these publics.

And you also need to be able to listen to them, and (know) who their gatekeepers are and how to engage them. For example, I was going to speak at a climate change conference and I thought – I had a friend of a friend who was a climate analyst and I said, “Maybe I should show my presentation to this person before engaging the audience.” It was very helpful, *kasi sabi niya*, “You know what, what I noticed in your presentation, you were confusing climate change with climate impact. And if you want credibility in this circle, they have to realize that you know the difference rather than confused.”

Michael Tan: You know this morning I woke up and ... there was this ‘sticky tune’ shouting in my head because last night I was at the cultural night [for the Lakbayan]. *Paulit-ulit*, and then I realized all those chanting that slogan really does have an effect on the brain and it’s a kind of communication *na hindi ko pa na-adopt*. Yet I know, as chancellor, as an anthropologist, we have to be very calm, we have to be dispassionate, we have to be scholarly and all. Which means also we cannot do the chanting and – *at, hindi bagay sa akin*. But I do feel as well sometimes, maybe very concretely when we had a press conference after the dispersal and I was in front because I had to speak also and all the national minorities who were around me were weeping because they had told their story; *umiiyak*, and I never felt so helpless *na* what am I going to say? The woman next to me was really convulsing in her tears.

What’s an anthropologist do, right? And so I just have to do this: I’ve realized that maybe in our efforts to be dispassionate, we forget that there’s still some basics there that we need. *Hindi pwedeng utak lang, na gusto nila slogan ng UP, “Utak at Puso”*. Sometimes we have to use the heart as well and forget about being dispassionate. I agree totally sometimes we need some anger. We need some fire in our hearts, that’s what will keep us going even when we’re very old – especially when we’re very old.

Aurora Roxas-Lim: One of the things that our anthropological society (when we organized it back then I was one of the founders)... realized social science is not a science. It’s a humanistic discipline. And the aim of a study of society is to make this... life better for people. And the majority of the people are poor, they are underprivileged, and they are oppressed. So I am very glad that you were able to get your Maguindanao

sister and I'm very glad Miss Lising is learning about museum work not as a collection of extensive items.

I was a pupil of (H. Otley) Beyer. His anthropology, and his archaeology, was the collection of precious, rare and exclusive objects. Now, I am very glad that you are involved with the community because when we were working at Peñafrancia and the Cañao case, we had a difficult time because the community did not know what we were doing, you see. Well, they thought we were looking for precious items. We explained to them these are the things we found: "*Ay panay buto. Panay buto. Panay kalansay.*" And we had a hard time convincing the community that "You have a responsibility to take good care of it."

And this is what we did in Kandihay (archeological site) in Bohol. We had to convince the local government: "This, this is your history. You have to take good care of it." And what is important is that the community, as Ms. Lising said, they have to be involved. We also have to be brave because *pinapatay ang mga tao natin*. It is important that our group—in fact I suggest we have a resolution, send it to (President Rodrigo) Duterte. This is our agenda. Don't only look for the drug pushers. These are the ground rules: peace, employ them, environmental protection. And please rein in, restrain your police. The police is supposed to protect the people, to protect their rights for assembly, their right to protest. Do not beat them up.

Ponciano Bennagen: I'm glad I got out of the university. I resigned in 1989. *Kasi sabi ni Mary (Racelis)*, universities can be constraining in some ways in spite of these pretensions to be producers of universal knowledge. And this is the challenge because of present company. I left UP 1989 because I got bored with it and started working in the field, so I became a community worker, a field worker. I still am, although the community and the field is constantly being redefined. I made a public declaration of the death of an anthropologist—that was the death of me as an anthropologist but people refused to accept that so they resolved to resurrect me. But even as I say that, I quickly had in mind that maybe we can declare this as the official birth of anthropology that is new—New, big, and deep. New, big, and deep. What do I mean by that?

Kasi ang daming mga seminal ideas, foundational ideas, in fact, that keep on recurring, what we discussed in variations of several themes –

foundational themes of anthropology. *Sa* enumeration *pa lang mauubos yung oras natin*. We need to do a lot ...

Anyway, the thing that brought me to anthropology and kept my interest in anthropology sustained is this whole idea of ‘holistic discipline’; holistic and *imperial*, in fact, in the sense that it can escape its disciplinary boundaries and explore further in space and time. Which is why I have come to a definition of anthropology partly as a decision. It is the investigation of values and socio-cultural transformations in time and space. It’s the idea of big and deep knowledge.

Augusto Gatmaytan: We study diversity so we should be respectful of diversity. ... In terms of content, what always occurs to me even now out in the field is the whole issue of sustainability. It’s a tricky problem but it is something that to me poses a challenge. Outside teaching, is what I am doing contributory to the sustainability of human life in an endangered egalitarian ecosystem?

Amazing what we can do from little incidents to something that would use the local, the national, the global, in Dap-ay. And you can do that only if you engage in *deep* anthropology, ... because, similarly, they are also being recognized as people... The whole idea of ‘sites of engagement’, *ang dami niyan*. *Ano ba yung* ‘sites of engagement’? Intellectual? Actual engagement? Incidentally, *marami na rin ang* anthropologists *na namatay* for fighting for their convictions, and we can enumerate that. At the local level we talk about diversity loss, environmental degradation. Because it’s very real in our personal lives. But it’s also something that you can connect to national problems, ... and economic change in terms of global environmental degradation, leading to all these problems about climate change, global warming, global inequality.

Indeed, once you have this vision of different sites of engagement you can connect the dots. Even if you are physically alone, ideally you feel connected. Because that’s where you are individual and trying to struggle for the very desire of the sustainability of, not only their own personal lives, but also the families, the communities, and the entire human species, and the other species; so we will need to introduce ‘interspecies anthropology’.

Having unpacked that, I’m a little worried, if you don’t unpack some of the positions about engagement for sustainability, for more

participation; if we do not put this in an entire context of the hegemonic, economic, and political philosophy of new interrelation that fosters this whole destructive processes of profit seeking corporations moving into the very lives of local peoples, of the national patrimony of the Philippine archipelago. We are an ecology of islands, rich in biodiversity, but also a biological diversity. This has strategic implications for the very lives of people who are struggling to propagate the indigenous knowledge of this particular crab, that particular fish, that particular bird to sustain them. And then we can move on already. That for me is an important concept. And we need to unpack the whole notion of *sustainability*. *Sites of engagement. Process*. I still think that in terms of process, inclusion – *participation* – is still important to uphold the values of a democracy.

So the whole idea is let's go through democratic processes as we address all these gray questions of sustainability. *Yun siguro yung pinaka-frame* to enable us to connect all of those.

Lessons from the Dap-ay and questions for the future

The conversation at the Dap-ay illustrates, in clear and at times intimate terms, the expansion of anthropological practices and engagements in the Philippines. With the variegation of our collective anthropological communities, it is still worth wondering what can become of our practice and the knowledge that anthropology gathers in our age and the coming ages. Along these lines of thinking, it should also be relevant to conjecture how we can live by the consequences of our choices to our profession, the academy, and the people whom we chose to engage with and who privileged us. Imagining how the transformative potentials of anthropology can be further harnessed, toward what ends, and who do we leave behind, need to be unsettled so we may know.

The Dap-ay suggests that there was an expansion of the terrain of anthropological engagements but, is it leading to compartmentalisation, disengagement, and disentanglement of the discipline? We also raised but left unanswered the question if these expansions represent variant beacons of social engagements or towering silos, resting inanimately next to but separating their practitioners. Are we living in an era of, or have always been living in a world of, fragmented anthropologies? Is fragmentation a bad condition, a good thing, or an inevitable outcome of an ever broadening and expanding field? What does this variation of anthropological entanglements mean for us, practitioners of anthropology in the Philippines, and the people we engage with?

Have we not been ‘engaged’, ‘public’, ‘militant’ practicing anthropologists, in the first place by virtue of our position as both scientists and citizens? Have we not already found ways of bringing together these fields of engagement in the interest of our communities? Does our position, as practitioners of and in the Global South unavoidably locate and establish us as Third World intellectuals? Does not our collective experience, as anthropologists steeled by our colonized history and squeezed by the politico-economic problems of ‘underdevelopment’ necessitate the making of new forms of anthropology informed by the contextual conditions of its practitioners (cf. Bennagen 1980)? Are these new anthropological forms better off placed outside the academia? What would become of anthropological knowledge and its circulation if anthropologists carry on with that trajectory? Would there be a conflict of interest if we straddle both the privileged world of the university and the exalted spaces extended to those who are engaged as servants of communities or of industries? Are any of these choices not the same elitist positions? Where do we find the peoples, societies, communities, and individuals - whom we claim to speak for and about - situated in these multiple modes of engagements?

These are a few of the questions that were discussed in the Dap-ay, a conversation inspired by the ancestral legacy of the Cordillera, that we admittedly appropriated, but also *celebrated*, with the discerning and engaged constituencies of anthropology. Whatever the outcomes of our continuing conversations, it is worth wondering what can become of our practice and the knowledge that anthropology gathers in our age and the coming ages. Along these lines of thinking, it should also be relevant to conjecture on how we can live by the consequences of our choices to our profession, the academy, and the people whom we chose to engage and who privileged us. Imagining how the transformative potentials of anthropology can be further harnessed, toward what ends, and who do we leave behind, need to be unsettled so we may know.

Finally, and ultimately, we may have to reckon with the question of: What anthropology is worth doing? And, How it can be done in our context and in our time? Must we always agree? These are questions that our small Dap-ay has not exactly answered but we may have to confront in the foreseeable years as our anthropological practice offers signs of moving forward to new landscapes of engagements.

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