Yohan Hong
*Powerlessness and A Social Imaginary in the
Philippines: A Case Study on Bahala na*

Abstract:

This paper calls attention to the sense of powerlessness of everyday people in the Philippines, and to the missional agency of US-based Filipino Protestants for the transformation of the Philippines. This research has been a journey to discover what kind of power is in play, how the fallen powers can be named and made visible, and then ultimately the ways through which power should be restored. In this process, I referred to the voices, perceptions, stories, and insights of US-based Filipino Protestants in Texas, in order to explore the causes of powerlessness. This paper focuses on how *Bahala na* as a Filipino cultural value, functions at some mythic level in relation to a social imaginary in such a way to cause and perpetuate a sense of powerlessness.

Furthermore, the missional agency of Filipino American Protestants has been seldom investigated in the academia of Diaspora Missiology and Intercultural Studies. This paper concludes that Filipino American Protestants have re-interpreted *Bahala na* in transforming ways through the power of their spiritual discipline and Protestant faith so that this paper shines light on the potentiality for them to be change agents who can help bring about the transformation in the Philippines.

Keywords: Powerlessness, Social Imaginary, *Bahala na,* Filipino American Protestants, Diaspora Missiology

Yohan Hong is a graduate from Ph.D. in Intercultural Studies at Asbury Theological Seminary and senior pastor of Oxford First United Methodist Church in the North Alabama Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church.

First Fruits

Introduction

The issue of powerlessness is too complicated to be defined by one factor. I argue that a sense of powerlessness functions in relation to its underlying social imaginaries in the Philippines. This paper unveils powerlessness by investigating the social imaginary embedded in *Bahala na* in which a sense of powerlessness could be implicit. To explore whether a sense of powerlessness functions as a social imaginary, I will first introduce definitions of social imaginary by several sociologists and then present how *Bahala na* functions as social imaginary causing and perpetuating a sense of powerlessness in the Philippines.

What Is A Social Imaginary?

The social imaginary has been widely discussed in recent years by scholars like Charles Taylor, Benedict Anderson, Arjun Appadurai, and Cornelius Castoriadis.[1] The topic of social imaginaries ranges "from the capitalist imaginary to the democratic imaginary, from the ecological imaginary to the global imaginary."[2] It is Charles Taylor who is usually credited with the definition of social imaginary. In *Modern Social Imaginaries,* Taylor defines social imaginary as "the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations."[3] Moreover, social imaginary "incorporates a sense of the normal expectations we have of each other, the kind of common understanding that enables us to carry out the collective practices that make up our social life."[4] In other words, this means a way that everyday people imagine their social surroundings. In a social imaginary people perceive the common understanding, conduct the common practices, and discern a sense of legitimacy. It is through the social imaginary that people have "a sense of how things usually go, of what missteps would invalidate the practices."[5]

A social imaginary is distinguished from a social theory in that "a social imaginary is carried in images, stories and legends rather than theoretical formulations."[6] For this reason, a social imaginary refers to "a culture's wide-angle and deep background of understanding that makes possible common practices, unarticulated understandings and relevant sense-giving features."[7] In this regard, it is appropriate to explore Filipino cultural values in order to unveil social imaginaries.

There are some other definitions of a social imaginary. According to Alberta Arthurs, the social imaginary is "the common understanding that makes social practices both possible and legitimate, which provides the backgrounds that makes sense of any given act in daily life."[8] For Manfred Steger, a social imaginary is a "deep-seated mode of understanding that provides the most general parameters within which people imagine their communal existence," so that it creates "an implicit background that makes possible communal practices and a widely shared sense of their legitimacy."[9] Simply put, a social imaginary provides a platform on which everyday people perceive the common understanding, conduct the common practices, and discern a sense of legitimacy. In what follows, I investigate a sense of powerlessness embedded in cultural values as a form of social imaginary.

Social Imaginaries and Powerlessness

In the circle of development studies, no one seems to be using the term *social imaginary* in relation to the concept of power. Instead, some scholars mention several different terminologies that designate "mentality and attitude" as one of the main factors that bring about development. Lawrence Harrison in *Underdevelopment Is a State of Mind* uses the term "the creative capacity to imagine and solve the problems"[10] to underscore the role of mentality and attitude in development. According to Harrison, despite the existing structural cracks in a system of society hindering human progress, human beings have achieved tremendous progress throughout history because of creative capacity. In a broad concept, I would say that a social imaginary is partially equivalent to mentality and attitude. Moreover, the term "creative capacity" represents another ramification of power-to, meaning the capability to decide actions and carry them out.[11] Here I see the interrelatedness between social imaginaries and power or powerlessness.

Some similar concepts to social imaginaries are found in the circle of sociology. Max Weber in *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* stresses that at the root of achievement is a set of values and attitudes that are associated with Protestant ethic: hard work, thrift, honesty, rationality, and austerity–in sum, "asceticism."[12] Weber points out values and attitudes as a determinant to overcoming a sense of powerlessness and bringing about achievement. In *The Sacred Canopy* Peter Berger presents that the religious beliefs and meanings held by individuals construct "plausibility structures" in which members of society legitimate social practices and orders.[13] The

contribution of Berger is to pinpoint a significant role of religion in society to form plausibility structures. In the same sense, social imaginaries are birthed, shaped, and practiced by the influence of religious soil embedded in cultural values. Religion tremendously impacts the formation of social imaginaries and then consequently the mentality and attitude of everyday people, including a sense of powerlessness, because it often uses symbols and other means that tap into the power of imagination. For what follows, I will introduce one cultural practice that connects the psycho-social powerlessness as embedded in Filipino social imaginaries.

Powerlessness and *Bahala na* Mentality

Rolando M. Gripaldo states that *Bahala na* has become "a philosophy of life, a cultural trait that has strongly developed into a significant core of Filipino attitude."[14] Then, the first question is likely to be, "What does *Bahala na* mean? And how do people use this expression in everyday life?" To answer these questions, I need to start with a quote from Teodoro A. Agoncillo's article:

> Can you go through that wall of fire? Bahala na. This is the last morsel we have; where do we get tomorrow's food? Bahala na. Don't gamble your last money: you might go home with pockets inside out. Bahala na. Such fatalism has bred in the Filipino a sense of resignation. He appears indifferent in the face of graft and corruption. He appears impassive in the face of personal misfortune. Yet this "Bahala na" attitude prevents him from being a crackpot.[15]

As the quote above suggests, *Bahala na* is literally translated as "Leave it up to God," "Come what may," "What will be will be," and "I don't care." *Bahala na* is one of the phrases that Filipinos use most often. As a matter of fact, this phrase appears to have "a nationwide linguistic acceptance from more than 80 major languages."[16] Thus, *Bahala na* is widely shared by large groups of people and seems to be the kind of common understanding and normal expectation in which everyday people carry out the collective practices that make up their social life. This fact qualifies *Bahala na* to be a social imaginary.

Despite its popularity, *Bahala na* is an idea that defies definition or explanation because it can be applied in various situations responsibly or irresponsibly. Nevertheless, many Filipino scholars like Jaime Bulatao,[17]

Rolando M. Gripaldo,[18] Tereso C. Casiño,[19] and José M. De Mesa[20] point out the fatalistic attitude that is deeply embedded in *Bahala na*. In everyday life, Filipinos say *Bahala na* when they are confronted with challenging situations and hardships which they are not able to handle and overcome. For this reason, *Bahala na* tends to be recognized as a fatalistic expression. Some other people argue that it can be also used in positive ways as "the spirit to take risks"[21] and "shock absorber"[22] in the midst of insurmountable situations. According to Casiño, "a Filipino toys with fatalism as a means of easing the pain of his or her circumstances, as well as lessening the burden of his existence. In such a case, *Bahala na* functions as a convenient theodicy for Filipinos."[23] De Mesa points out its positive aspect as well: "*Bahala na* provides Filipinos the capacity to laugh at themselves and the situations they are in. It reflects, in addition, the oriental philosophy to be in harmony with nature. While it may appear passive, it is nevertheless dynamic without being coercive."[24]

No matter what its interpretations are, I would like to give an emphasis on the religious connotation deeply embedded in *Bahala na*. I argue that this is not just a cultural expression but also a religious concept even though many Filipinos are ignorant of this. It is important to recognize its religious origin because religion has tremendous impact upon Filipinos' lives. When it comes to ethnic traits of Filipinos, two major things are usually mentioned: trust in God and family-centeredness.[25] Thus, Filipinos are known as one of the most religious peoples in the world. For this reason, it is critical for Filipinos to correctly understand the meanings of *Bahala na* and discern them in such a way as to overcome a sense of powerlessness.

The Religious Origins of *Bahala na*

Bahala na is rooted in traditional Filipino spirituality in which people believe that "a cosmic force (not necessarily a Supreme Being) controls the flow of the events in the universe."[26] Then, in what kind of religious soil did this expression originate and become rooted in Filipino culture? As some Filipino scholars like Lynn Bostrom and F. Landa Jocano assert, it is believed that "the word *Bahala* was derived from the word *Bathala* in Tagalog that literally means God."[27] In this sense, *Bahala na* reasonably has a religious origin in its usage. Interestingly, Casiño argues that throughout Philippine history, *Bahala na* had been nurtured and established in four different religious soils: animism, Hinduism, Islam, and Catholicism.[28]

The first soil was animism. It may be controversial to state that *Bahala na* originated from animism because there seems to be no strong interrelatedness between animism and *Bahala na.* Ancient Filipinos worshipped celestial beings, nature, and ancestral spirits. Then, how can we relate animism to *Bahala na?* Casiño points out the broad influence of animism manifested even today in the form of Folk Catholicism, and in Philippine society as a whole.[29] In the Filipino psyche, according to him, "the world is a series of karma, an ethical pre-deterministic system of cause-and-effect."[30] Therefore, in this animistic worldview, anything that happens to someone is attributed to a cause, that is, "an impersonal force known as suwerte (luck), tsamba (chance), or kapalaran (destiny)."[31] Casiño tries to explain the ancient spiritual soil for Filipino spirituality. In this sense, the cosmology of Filipinos might function as the essential spiritual soil nurturing the birth of *Bahala na.*

The second religious soil was Hinduism. In the 900s A.D, the religious ideas of Hinduism reached the Philippines through Hindu traders from India. A Filipino anthropologist, F. Landa Jocano, asserts that the word *Bahala* originated from the word *Bathala* literally meaning God, but more specifically *Bathala,* known as the highest deity in the folk religion of the Philippines, is of Hindu origin.[32] According to Casiño, Filipinos were able to have the "risk taking and adventuresome trait" because of their faith in *Bathala* who is known as "a powerful yet benevolent deity," consequently believed to "lend, assist, and help regardless of whatever circumstances they have."[33] This interpretation of *Bathala* has greatly influenced Filipino's religiosity in that they not only take a risk in the midst of adversity, but also tend to be fatalistic in waiting for this powerful and benevolent deity. The ambivalence of *Bahala na,* fatalistic and agential, originated from interpreting the meaning of *Bathala,* a Hindu deity.

However, some people might argue that it is problematic to assert a direct cause-and-result relationship between Hinduism and the fatalistic consciousness of ancient Filipinos regardless of the assumption that Hinduism is originally fatalistic. As I explore Filipino history, however, there are some considerable evidences that early Filipino culture with the fatalistic bent of Filipino's religiosity came under the influence of Hinduism in areas such as languages,[34] folklore, arts, and even literature written during pre-colonial period.[35] In effect, religion does not exist by itself. Rather, it is birthed, formed, practiced and melted in cultures, life style, and worldviews of everyday people. Therefore, based on these evidences, I would say that

Filipino religiosity had been greatly influenced by Hinduism, particularly its fatalistic bent.

The third religious soil was Islamic faith, which first arrived in 1380 A.D. through the visit of a Muslim missionary named Mukdum.[36] The Islamic influence upon the fatalistic mentality of Filipinos looks more obvious because of Islam's pre-deterministic consciousness that allows people to "resign themselves to fate (kismet) according to the will of Allah (Insha'Allah)."[37] Casiño asserts that Bahala na "reinforces the belief that every event and circumstance in the universe emanates from the will of Allah."[38] However, his argument falls into inaccuracy in that he did not distinguish between these two words in Arabic: Tawakkul (توكل) and Tawakul (تواكل). Tawakkul (توكل) means "to rely [sic] on Allah and do your best to reach your goal" while Tawakul (تواكل) signifies "complete dependence on Allah without making any effort, thinking in a fatalistic way."[39] In the latter, Muslims tend to think that if Allah wills, it will happen and there is no need for any effort. I think Muslims are expected to believe in the former, but in reality many of them tend to believe and live in the latter. In effect, it is well-known that the pattern of their saying Insha'Allah or according to the will of Allah has a fatalistic connotation. In this sense, I think that Casiño points to the latter when he explains the fatalistic mentality of Filipinos that might have been caused by the Islamic faith. These two different understandings of the will of Allah have greatly influenced Filipino Christians' perceptions of God's will. In sum, animistic religiosity of ancient Filipinos was cultivated in the spiritual soil of fatalistic Hinduism, and then Filipino folk spirituality became more inclined to fatalism under the pre-deterministic attitude of Islam.

The fourth religious soil was Catholic Christianity in the 1500s. When Spanish Catholic friars arrived in the archipelago, they discovered that "Filipinos already had existing religious representations" so that the friars "simply assimilated Filipinos' folk religious expressions in their missionary works."[40] It resulted in "the baptizing of local deities with Christian names."[41] Casiño asserts, "Folk Catholicism developed by giving local deities equivalent functions and powers with patron saints."[42] However, one question arises: "In what specific ways did Spanish Catholicism affect the fatalistic bent of Bahala na?" Due to the Spanish friars' strategy of religious assimilation, over the centuries folk religious concepts including Bahala na had been accepted without critical objection by Filipino Catholics and then later even many Filipino Protestants.[43] As a result, Bahala na seems to

be regarded as the equivalent of "Thy will be done" in the Lord's Prayer.[44] Jaime Bulato asserts that this practice of combining *Bahala na* (fatalistic worldview) with "Thy will be done" (faith worldview) has led to the Filipino experience of "split-level spirituality."[45] This syncretistic tendency posed by Bulato and Casiño needs to be further investigated through the eyes of contemporary Filipino Christians through ethnographic research in the Philippines. Interestingly, my interviews with U.S. based Protestant Filipinos in Texas proved that they rarely use *Bahala na* in a fatalistic way, and do not interpret this expression as the equivalent of "Thy will be done." However, my interviewees hinted at the high possibility that this syncretistic tendency could be true in the case of everyday Christians in the Philippines.

Bahala na as a Product of Filipino Religiosity

On the basis of these four religious soils mentioned above, the *Bahala na* attitude had been birthed, nurtured, and rooted into Filipinos' mindsets and cultures. Then, another question arises. Why and how do Filipinos in the Philippines continue to say *Bahala na?* Casiño has one answer to this:

> *Bahala na* evolves as a religious tool or device in which a Filipino practically copes with the adverse demands and circumstances of life. In order to survive, a Filipino toys with fatalism as a means of erasing the pain of his or her circumstances as well as lessening the burden of his existence. In such case, *Bahala na* functions as a convenient theodicy for Filipinos.[46]

This fascinating interpretation of *Bahala na* in a way pinpoints its religious characteristic. When they say *Bahala na* in adversities and crises, Filipinos tend to be consciously or unconsciously reminded of God or a Supreme Being or a cosmic force or even *suwerte* (luck) or *kapalaran* (destiny), which is believed to "control their lives based on a fixed blueprint."[47] I believe that this religious origin of *Bahala na* enabled it to pass down from generation to generation and take roots in Filipinos' mindsets. Filipinos' religiosity has reinforced this expression to continue to exist and function as a social imaginary. Moreover, as an idea or a story is embedded and passed down in a religious form, a social imaginary is also carried in a similar way to this. Taylor explains this point, that social imaginary "is carried in images, stories, and legends."[48] Thus, *Bahala na* is a religious product of different

images, stories, and legends of different spiritual soils throughout Filipino history.

Then, if *Bahala na* functions as a social imaginary in the context of the Philippines, in what way is *Bahala na* related to a sense of powerlessness or powerfulness? This question is important because if it is just fatalistic, it feeds upon powerlessness, but if agential, then it is possible to see it as a resource to gain power over a powerless situation. To answer this question, we need to first investigate how Filipinos interpret and practice *Bahala na* in everyday lives.

Bahala na as a Fatalistic Mentality

The most popular interpretation of *Bahala na* is to see it as a fatalistic mentality. As mentioned above, this fatalism has been influenced by traditional religious soils. Casiño pinpoints that in daily practice, "*Bahala na* is considered undesirable because Filipinos tend to use it as a negative psychological justification for their failure to take up human responsibility and accountability in times of hardships and crises."[49] According to Casiño, "The downside of *Bahala na* lies in its fatalistic bent where a Filipinos leaves everything up to *kapalaran* (destiny)."[50]

This proves true by the empirical data collected from my ethnographic research. Jerico, an interviewee, states this point:

> *Bahala na* is something like "Who cares about tomorrow?" Let's leave it to luck or destiny. But the word *Bahala* comes from the word *Bathala*, which means God. So the good meaning of *Bahala na* is "leaving it to God. And God will take care of it." But the downside of it is just saying *Bahala na*, meaning to say, leave it to God without doing anything, sitting down, and just leaving it to destiny. So that's also the problem of many people who stay in poverty status. That is a mentality that means "Whatever we do is because we are like this already." They created that mentality that "I'm already this and there's nothing that I can do about it."

Jerico interpreted *Bahala na* as a fatalistic mentality and related it to the issue of poverty. He articulated that people in poverty tend to use this expression in a fatalistic way. This statement alludes that the *Bahala na* attitude might contribute to perpetuating poverty by justifying frustrating situations without doing their best to overcome them.

This fatalistic interpretation of *Bahala na* is supported by another tendency of everyday people, with a lower economic status in the Philippines, to blame the rich and the government for their circumstances. Here are the words of Jerico:

> If you will only depend on the government or other people for your needs, your sustainability will be a problem. You will remain in that condition. In the Philippines, we always hear people blaming the rich. They say, "We are like this because of the people who are rich. We are like this because of those politicians who've been corrupt." But, then, my question is, "Have you done something really for yourselves? Aren't you just entertaining that mentality that we are like this and we will remain like this?" I think we have a lot of people in the Philippines who have that kind of mentality.

Thus, *Bahala na* can be used as an expression of the poor people to blame the powerful like the rich and the politicians. As a result, they identify themselves as powerless. *Bahala na* might not represent cosmic fatality, but the fatality of structure. The lack of agency inside people is definitely interrelated to the asymmetric structure of power. Precisely, lack of agency is a by-product of an unjust structure and the structure is reproduced and perpetuated by lack of agency.

In the same alignment, Teresa, an interviewee, explains *Bahala na* in the concept of power-within or personal self-confidence: "*Bahala na* is more of powerlessness. Okay, whatever will be will be. That is when you don't have any power. If you feel like you are powerful, you don't say that. If you are confident, you will do everything that you can do. If you want to give up, you want to say *Bahala na*." To Teresa, those who say *Bahala na* in the midst of challenges and hardships beyond their capability communicate their low power-within or low self-confidence.[51] My ethnographic interviews verify that Protestant Filipinos in the US believe this to be the correct interpretation of *Bahala na*. In other words, only those who recognize agency inside them do not say *Bahala na*. Rather, they take up their responsibility and accountability in times of hardships and crises. In conclusion, *Bahala na* is more used as a fatalistic expression rather than agential, consequently feeding upon the powerlessness of everyday people in the Philippines.

Bahala na as an Optimistic Spirit

One lingering question is whether or not *Bahala na* can be used as agential in a certain way. Pe-Pua and Protacio-Marcelino pose an optimistic spirit of *Bahala na*. According to them, *Bahala na* defies definition or explanation because it can be applied variously depending on how one perceives circumstances, life, power, and even faith in God.[52] As a result, they argue that *Bahala na* is not "fatalism" but "determination and risk-taking."[53] In their point of view, in saying *Bahala na,* Filipinos are "telling themselves that they are ready to face the difficult situation before them, and will do their best to achieve their objectives."[54] In fact, Pe-Pua and Protacio-Marcelino assert that Filipinos are believed to "have probably done their best to prepare for the future situation" even before they have uttered *Bahala na.*[55] This interpretation foregrounds the more agential nature of *Bahala na,* and implies an ongoing process for contemporary Filipino psychologists to re-interpret and re-construct Filipinos' cultural values and ethnic identities.

US-based Protestant Filipinos in Texas are a case for this. They usually do not utter *Bahala na;* the only time they might say *Bahala na* is when they do their best for the good and then wait for God's guidance. Roland pinpoints this:

> My *Bahala na* is, "I'm going to do something good and whatever happens I'm going to stand for it. That's my *Bahala na.* I will leave it to God because I know that God will not leave me. It's going to go through. He's going to help me. If it will fail, I'm still confident because I will get the help of the Lord, because it was just not His will. I guess it is personality and culture. The common *Bahala na* is negative. I don't believe in that *Bahala na.* I believe in *Bahala na* only when it's positive.

Surprisingly, my interviewees in Texas seem to interpret *Bahala na* differently from what everyday people do in the Philippines. As a matter of fact, almost every interviewee answered in such a way that whereas everyday people in the Philippines tend to utter *Bahala na* as a fatalistic mentality, Filipino Americans in Texas tend to use *Bahala na* only in positive ways.

What brought about this difference in its interpretations? What I found from the interview with Roland is that he as a Filipino American Protestant does not believe in destiny, but rather believes in God's will helping those who help themselves. His case demonstrates how theology

or faith in God plays a significant role in its interpretation of *Bahala na*. This is aligned with the assertion of Pe-Pua and Protacio-Marcelino, which says that the definition or explanation of *Bahala na* can be applied variously depending on how one perceives circumstances, life, power, and even faith in God.[56] For Filipino American Protestants in Texas, *Bahala na* seems to be not "fatalism" but more of "determination and risk-taking."[57] Thus, those in Texas repackage the concept of *Bahala na*, mainly because they theologize its meaning.

How can this same expression as a social imaginary be used and interpreted differently depending on perception of situation, life, power, and faith in God? How should we understand the ambivalence of *Bahala na* in its interpretation and application? To explore the answers of these questions, I found out another aspect of a social imaginary, that is, social imaginary's susceptibility to change.

Susceptibility of Social Imaginary to Change

Noticeably, the social imaginary can change. Jeffery Buckles maintains, "Although the social imaginary explains and reproduces human interaction, it is not static, and is susceptible to change as human knowledge changes, meaning that how humans know, interpret and live in the world is not a constant"[58] Since social imaginaries can change, they "enable humankind to make sense of the world in which they live, as current knowledge is used to interpret the domains."[59] In this regard, *Bahala na* is susceptible to change. That is why there is the ambivalence in interpreting *Bahala na*: a fatalistic mentality and an optimistic spirit. Throughout my ethnographic research, many participants stated that everyday people in the Philippines tend to use *Bahala na* as a fatalistic mentality, whereas Filipino American Protestants in Texas do not. As a matter of fact, almost all my participants answered that they do not say *Bahala na* as a fatalistic mentality, and also have rarely heard this expression among Filipino Americans in Texas. As mentioned, I argue that theology or faith in God played a crucial role in making this difference.

Then, what other factors brought about this difference between Filipinos in the Philippines and Filipino American Protestants in Texas? Based on my ethnographic research, the impacting determinants are social location, education, and time focus.

Social Location

First, their social location in Texas seems to affect their religious reading of *Bahala na*. Jerico demonstrates:

> I've never heard the word *Bahala na* among Filipino Americans in Texas. Everything is accessible in the US. Those who are not rich also eat what the rich eat here. But you have to work. You have to do something. So, for the Filipinos who migrated in the US, *Bahala na* system does not work. God will help those who help themselves. Manna will not just drop from the heaven. You can always do something to better your life.

According to Jerico, Filipino Americans in Texas seem to not stay in a sense of fatalism. Rather, they appear to believe in God who helps those who help themselves. To them, relying on God does not mean just waiting for God's help without doing anything. Trusting in God requires their responsible actions accordingly. Although theology is still guiding their actions, I would assert that a shift in social location precipitates a shift in theological distinctive.

Nevertheless, I do not believe that all Filipinos in poverty in the Philippines say *Bahala na* in fatalistic ways. I do not also believe that all Filipinos in Texas interpret *Bahala na* with an optimistic spirit. In the words of Buckles, as Filipinos interpret their domains (the Philippines and Texas) in different ways, the interpretation of *Bahala na* changes.[60] On one hand, everyday people under the asymmetric structure of power in the Philippines tend to perceive their frustrating realities in fatalistic ways. On the other hand, Filipinos in Texas believe that they can overcome their circumstances and everything is possible as long as they work hard in the USA where socio-political-economic structures of power appear to be more supportive to the well-being of everyday people. Thus, the interpretation of *Bahala na* is susceptible to change depending on its social location.

Education

Second, education plays a crucial role in forming, legitimating, and perpetuating social imaginary by enabling the development of persons. Through education, persons develop a form of consciousness, for "to be conscious of things requires some set of concepts through which experience is ordered and made sense of and through this ability to make sense of the world."[61]

The participants in my research evidenced that many of them overcame poverty and a sense of powerlessness through education. The interviewees stated that their continuous education even under the disempowering structures of the Philippines made them self-confident and finally enabled their dreams to come true in the States. Here is one example for this case from my interviewee, Patria:

> When it comes to low socio-economic status, they just accept that we are poor, and cannot go to school. For me, it is all about my self-goal and self-motivation. My husband and I came from a poor family, not an elite one. My parents were teachers. So they had a little money. But my parents taught us that education is your best tool to improve yourself. We were not trained to depend on the wealth that our parents might have. Not depend on our family. They taught us that you have to desire to be somebody someday. They taught us that we had to study hard, and study well. They told us that once you study hard, you would know how to reach your goal. So it was an individual choice instead of depending on the government or assistance. My husband and I had our goals.

Some people assert that the power structure is the most crucial factor that determines whether people become powerful or powerless. As a matter of fact, many of my interviewees stated that the poor people in the Philippines tend to be fatalistic because of the disempowering structures. However, other people like Patria assert that education motivated her to be successful and organized in her life so that, in the words of Richard Pring,[62] she has been able to develop a form of consciousness. Patria delivered some insights on how people overcome situations and are also overwhelmed by situations. It is dependent upon the mentality of people. In her words, it is an individual choice, and an individual's self-motivation, not structural evil. This connotes how she made a difference by exercising her self-confidence or power-within under the asymmetric power structure where power-over dominates. In the words of Harrison, she maximized her "creative capacity"[63] to imagine a better future, and solve problems she faced. It turned out that the poverty and lack of resources around her life paradoxically reinforced her to keep on seeking self-confidence to improve her life by education. In this sense, it is noticeable that education plays a significant role in awakening people's agency and developing the creative capacity of human beings for progress.

In addition, her story also demonstrates how her power-to or self-confidence was wielded to make a decision for her own destiny instead of remaining in powerlessness. In the words of Harrison, power-within and power-to of Patria conquered "a paralyzing and self-defeating mythology"[64] deeply embedded in people's mindsets where powerlessness might take root. The case of Patria illustrates how education can affect the change of a social imaginary by the intricate interplay between agency and structure.

Time Focus

Third, time focus appears to affect the interpretation of *Bahala na* between Filipinos in the Philippines and Filipino Americans in Texas. Time focus has been one of the significant issues in development studies. Harrison maintains that the worldview's time focus like past, present, or future is of crucial importance for development. He states:

> If a society's major focus is on the past–on the glory of earlier times or in reverence of ancestors–or if it is absorbed with today's problems of survival, the planning, organizing, saving, and investment that are the warp and woof of development are not likely to be encouraged. Orientation toward the future implies the possibility of change and progress.[65]

Harrison points out that more potential for development lies in orientation toward the future, not the past, and today. His assertion hints at why everyday people in the Philippines are more focused on today and tend to interpret *Bahala na* as a fatalistic mentality. June, an interviewee, pinpoints that Filipinos in the Philippines are more focused on present survival.

> They are more focused on surviving on a day-to-day basis. You know, they focus on themselves like "we need to survive." They say, "We need to find a way to get food in our mouth today. I don't care much about what's going on in the local community or in a bigger picture." I think a lot of people in the Philippines are focused on "We need to get through one day at a time." You know, people here in the US have more of the vision for the future. They say, "I can see tomorrow what I want to happen."

In June's view, everyday people in the Philippines might be apt to remain powerless and delay development in their lives because their time focus

is on the present. That is the reason why they do not plan for the future. Here the new alignment is presented between time focus and plan. The challenges and hardships in their lives might cause people to say *Bahala na* which hinders them from dreaming of and planning a better future. This demonstrates how everyday people with a lower socio-political-economic status could become fatalistic.

In the same vein, several interviewees in Texas mentioned the phrase "plan for the future" when they were asked to explain *Bahala na.* It seemed that time and *Bahala na* are interrelated in some ways. Here are the words of Luz: "*Bahala na* is not a good attitude. When you say this, it is because you do not plan ahead of time. If you do not plan, you will fail." Ruth, an interviewee, also states: "People who are not more into planning use this expression. I am more of a planner. You would rarely hear that word from me. I would draft a plan. I am more of an organized person." Patria, an interviewee, asserts: "*Bahala na* is like whatever comes. No! I don't like whatever comes. I would like to have a plan. I would like to have steps. I write down if I have two things to decide. I write what is good of this and what is bad of that. Then I've never been down to *Bahala na*. I plan my life." Interestingly, those in Texas who are focused on planning their future do not say *Bahala na* with a fatalistic mentality. In summation, the different perceptions on time focus of everyday people demonstrates why *Bahala na* as a social imaginary is susceptible to change and why the interpretation of this social imaginary ended up being ambivalent between fatalism and optimism.

Bahala na and Split-level Christianity

As discussed above, *Bahala na* has a multi-layered background from different religious traditions. From these religious soils, Filipinos in contemporary Philippine society confront two frameworks for understanding God's will: "either a God who predetermines one's destiny or a God who is interested in and cares for everyday people."[66] In the former, Filipinos "leave themselves to fate" and "simply wait passively on their fortunes or misfortunes."[67] In the latter, Filipinos "live a life of faith, guided in a personal relationship with God."[68] Moreover, Spanish Christianity in the Philippines did not transform the traditional fatalistic concept of *Bahala na* to a Christian way of understanding God's will.[69] For this reason, according to Casiño, many contemporary Filipino Christians have tended to "combine faith with fate," and to equate "Thy will be done" and *Bahala na* "without

critical reflection and theological objection," which results in a syncretistic form of spirituality.[70]

In my ethnographic research with US-based Protestant Filipinos, almost every participant replied that they neither believe in nor use *Bahala na* in a fatalistic way. As described earlier, the causes for this difference come from various factors such as social location, education, and time focus. Nevertheless, I would like to underscore their faith in interpreting God's will as the major cause of that difference. In the interviews, they communicated an awareness of the agency inside them, which is based on interpreting God's will in such a way that God helps those who help themselves. Their understanding of God's will does not exclude a sense of personal responsibility and of trust in Divine Providence. They show a good example of how to overcome the syncretistic form of *Bahala na*.

Conclusion

In this paper, I investigated one major Filipino cultural value, that is, *Bahala na,* which produce negative social imaginaries that generate and perpetuate a sense of powerlessness in the Philippines. My interviewees and some scholarly writings show that this cultural value functions at some mythic level in relation to social imaginaries in the Philippines, and that there seems to be strong interrelationships between this social imaginary and a sense of powerlessness. Furthermore, a sense of powerlessness results from a lack of agency inside people, and this agency is also strongly affected by social imaginaries in a society. In addition, these social imaginaries are birthed, nurtured, fortified, and practiced under the influence of the social system. For this reason, a sense of powerlessness is not only a matter of social structure, but also of social imaginary. Such cultural values should be explored as the main causes for a sense of powerlessness.

My interviews discovered that *Bahala na,* on one hand, tends to be recognized as a fatalistic expression rather than agential. When people are confronted with challenging situations and hardship that are beyond their control, they utter this expression and consequently feed upon powerlessness of everyday people in the Philippines. This paper explored the fatalistic religious background embedded in *Bahala na,* which had birthed, nurtured, and established *Bahala na*: animism, Hinduism, Islam, and Catholicism. On the other hand, some people argue that *Bahala na* can be also used in positive ways as a "shock absorber" in which people are willing to face their hardships and do their best to achieve their own

goals. My interviews found that Filipino American Protestants in Texas do not utter *Bahala na* and they do not believe in destiny or fatalism. Rather, they view God as the One who helps those who help themselves. Two factors made this difference: their perspective in interpreting God's will and the awareness of agency in themselves.

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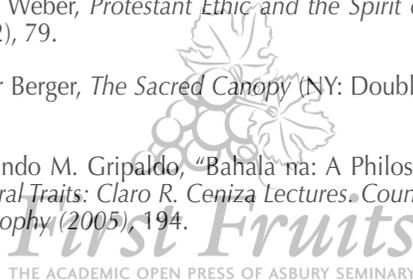
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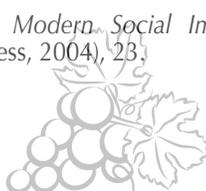
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