Confession, Conversion, and Reciprocity in Early Tagalog Colonial Society

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If one were a Tagalog convert to Christianity in the seventeenth or early eighteenth century, one would have probably been compelled to go to confession at least once a year. Confronting the Spanish priest, one would be subjected to his anxious probing in the vernacular as he proceeded through a checklist of possible transgressions against each of the Ten Commandments. Such checklists in the local language, called confessionarios, were common throughout the colonial period.\(^1\) Compiled by missionaries skilled in the Tagalog, they were designed to serve as mnemonic devices to aid Spanish clerics in eliciting the confessions of their native flock.

The questions contained in the confessionarios systematically delved not only into sinful acts, but into the sinful thoughts, words, and desires which informed the commission or contemplation of such acts. Whether these involved paying homage to the spirits (nono) of this forest or that river, or employing the services of a shaman (babaylan) for some curing ritual or the interpretation of dreams—sins against the first and second commandments, respectively—the confessor demanded no less than an unconditional recounting of sins by way of a rigorous accounting for them.\(^2\) A Tagalog male, for example, would have been beset by the following sort of questioning, remark-

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\(^2\) See Vicente L. Rafael, “Contracting Christianity: Conversions and Translations in Early Tagalog Colonial Society” (Ph.D diss., Cornell University, 1984), 107–31, for a more thorough discussion of the procedures of accounting and the internalization of guilt with regard to confessional discourse.

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able not so much for its luridness as for its typicality, with regard to the sixth commandment:

355. Have you committed a sin with some woman?

* * *

366. How many times did you sin with her?
367. You say that you always saw each other alone, well then, how do you expect me to know how many times those were?
368. If you can’t give me the exact number of times, give me a rough estimate, tell me more or less how many times?
369. And if you can’t tell me this, tell me how many years, or months, or weeks, or days has it been since you started sinning with her.
370. And during this entire period, how many times a week did you sin with her? Was it every day, or every other day, or what?
371. And aside from all those times you slept with her, did you not at other days and hours also cavort and play around in a wanton manner?
372. And during those moments of playing around didn’t you at times just verbally joke around, and at other times embrace each other, and kiss each other, and touch each other, touching every single part of your bodies without reserve?
373. And did something dirty come out of your body?
374. And did you cause her to emit something dirty, too?
375. How many times did you play around in this manner, for example, within a week? And how many times did each of you have an emission? Because not only is this a sin, indeed, it is a very serious sin.
376. Aside from all this, I also suspect that every time you saw her or thought of her, you also lusted for her. Wasn’t this the case?
377. And because of your lust, did you do anything to your body, any kind of lewdness? And did your body emit something dirty?3

What is curious about this passage is the way in which the priest’s discursive drift mimics the sexual act it is hunting down. Interest in the quantity of transgressions leads to a feverish desire to learn of their quality. This periodically climaxes, as it were, with the questions, “And did something dirty come out of your—or her—body?” Here, the authority of the confessor seems to come precisely from being able to locate those moments when the male convert squandered what should have been held in reserve, to be deposited only for the purpose of reproducing other potential converts. What is implicit in this and other similar exchanges is the sense of “You wasted yours while I still have mine.” That is, the sense on the confessor’s part of being able to have the means with which to track down each and every single thought, word, and deed that led the convert to loose his “property”—a property that, having originated with God, should have been used only for the purpose of reproducing a surplus that could then be returned to Him. And

3 Fray Sebastian Totanes, Manual tagalog para auxilio a los religiosos de esta provincia de S. Gregoriao Magno de Descalzos de N.S. Padre S. Francisco de Filipinas (Sampaloc: Convento de Nuestra Señora de Loreto, 1745), 133–37.
having located those moments of loss, the priest, through the penitent, could
then initiate their recuperation into a narrative of sin, an admission of guilt,
and the submission to and hence affirmation of God’s laws. What was lost
could thus be recovered in language. By insisting on the translation of the past
into a comprehensive tabulation of discrete acts and desires, confessional
discourse substitutes for the imagined experience of previous transgression
the current act of its retelling. The confession that the priest extracts from
the penitent is thus the result of a labor of accounting for and recounting the past.
This narrative product is then delivered by the agency of the priest back to the
supposed origin of all property, indeed, the final owner of all the means with
which to secure property: God the Father.

We began this essay with the preceding note on confession mainly because
it suggestively encapsulates, from the missionary point of view, the more
salient features of the larger process of conversion that in large measure
determined the shape of Spanish colonial rule in the Philippines. It is this
process of conversion—as an historical phenomenon that had an explicit
though highly unstable linguistic basis—that we wish to examine here.

Conversion entailed evangelization—literally the dissemination of God’s
Word, which is none other than Christ. As the Son of God, Christ is believed
to be the special Sign of the Father’s authority. The sacred Sign in turn
provided men and women with the privileged means with which to purchase
salvation—the sacraments. These were meant to serve as the codes that were
to effect the conversion of bodies and souls into the elements of God’s Word.4
To avail oneself of the sacraments is precisely to take on the Sign of God, that
is, to confess one’s inherent sinfulness and hence one’s ultimate and unending
dependence upon an omnipotent Father through the Son and the Son’s chosen
representatives on earth.

In the early colonial period (late sixteenth to the early eighteenth century),
the chosen representatives of the Sign happened to be Spaniards.5 As propon-
teurs of a revitalized Catholicism and envoys of an expansive Castilian mon-
archy, the Spanish missionaries sought to capture not only native bodies but,

4 Catholic theology regards Christ Himself as the source and author of all the sacraments; they
were codified into a set of seven distinct rituals by the Council of Trent. Their crucial importance
lies in their function of bringing God’s gift to bear on the convert. Sacraments are signs valued for
their capacity to make transparent the source of all gifts. Their power is such that in accordance
with the Thomistic formulation, “they effect what they signify; they are signs that cause what
they signify and cause by signifying” (A. M. Amado, “Sacraments of the Church,” in New
sacraments are thus the codes which constitute their own utterance so that the articulation of each
sacrament brings with it the articulation of the entire history of Christianity.

5 The combined effects of Spanish racism, royal legislation, and the absence of adequate
institutions for training natives for the priesthood made it impossible for a native clergy to emerge
prior to the second half of the eighteenth century. See Horacio de la Costa, S.J., “The Develop-
ment of the Native Clergy in the Philippines,” in Studies in Philippine Church History, Gerald
more important, native minds and souls. Because of this, they desired not only the external submission of the conquered populace but their internal accession to the king’s will to the extent that it was reflective of God’s. The politics of evangelization insisted that the relationship between ruler and ruled be determined by the uncompromising surrender of both to one God and to His laws.\(^6\) Conquest through conversion was thus idealized as the totalizing hierarchization of everything and everyone under a single ruler at once present and absent in His vast realm. To convert was then to accept God’s domination via a mediating chain of representatives: the sacraments, the liturgy, the Church, and its priests.

It is worth noting, however, that in the history of Spanish-Tagalog encounters one of the conditions that made possible this dialectic of submission was a process of linguistic exchange, that of translation. As with the Indians of the New World, the indios of the Philippines were subjected to the faith in their own language. The translation of Christian doctrine into the vernacular was a key feature of evangelization. And among the various languages in the archipelago, Tagalog, which was spoken in the most populous and fertile areas adjacent to the colonial capital of Manila, received the most sustained attention from the missionary writers. Indicative of this are the numerous grammar books, called artes, and dictionaries, called vocabularios, published in this vernacular, along with devotional literature in translation by Spanish priests.\(^7\) The fragment of the confessionario text included above is an example of this prodigious production.

The translation of the doctrine into the Tagalog vernacular, however, resulted in the transformation of the language itself. Highly charged words such as Dios, Espíritu Santo, Cruz, Jesu Christo, et cetera, which the Spaniards felt had no direct equivalent in the local language, were kept in their untranslated forms. In the interest of conversion, translation prescribed, just as it proscribed, the language in which the natives were to receive and return God’s

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\(^6\) The record of the conflicts and their resolutions between Spanish ecclesiastical and civil authorities with regard to such things as the collection of tribute, the solicitation of native submission, and the extraction of corvée labor from the natives testifies to persistent attempts to instill the primacy of evangelization in the spread and consolidation of Spanish rule in the Philippines. See “Actas del Primer Sinodo de Manila (1582–86),” Philippiana Sacra, 4:12 (September–December, 1969), 425–537; John Schumacher, S.J., “The Manila Synodal Tradition: A Brief History,” Philippine Studies, 27 (1979), 285–348. The ideological supremacy of evangelization received, of course, its most explicit expression in the institution of the patronato real (i.e., the royal patronage of the Church in the Indies). See Costa, “Development of Native Clergy,” 69–71.

\(^7\) Phelan, Hispanization, 50–51; Schumacher, “Manila Synodal Tradition,” 309; Rafael, “Contracting Christianity,” 15–57. For Tagalog, the exemplary arte was that of Fray Francisco Blancas de San José, Arte de la lengua tagala (Bataan: por Tomas Pinpin, 1610); while the most significant vocabularios were that of Fray Pedro de San Buenaventura, Vocabulario de la lengua tagala (Pila: por Tomas Pinpin, 1613) and the two volume compilation of Fray Juan de Noceda and Fray Pedro San Lucar, Vocabulario de la lengua tagala (Manila, 1754; 3d ed., Manila: Imprenta de Ramirez y Giraudier, 1860).
Word. This is suggestive of the incipient politics of translation where conversion was concerned. Such becomes apparent from even the most cursory reading of the missionary grammar books published from the seventeenth century.

In the Tagalog *artes* for example, what is immediately striking is the use of the Latin and Castilian languages as the principal points of reference in reconstructing Tagalog grammar. The linguistic machinery of Tagalog is structured in terms of *nombres, verbos, adjectivas, pasivas, activas, acusativas, imperativos, preteritos*, and so forth. It is as if the missionary, in order to understand Tagalog, had first to superimpose on it the grammatical grid of another language, Latin.

The absence of Tagalog terms in the designation of Tagalog grammar is a curious circumstance. The impression one gets from reading missionary-composed *artes* is that grammar as such did not exist for the Tagalogs before the missionaries began writing about the language. In order to use Tagalog as a tool of conversion, the missionary writers, it seems, had first to determine its parts. But they did so precisely by relocating the native language in the complex grid of Latin and Castilian discourse. The linguistic apparatus of Latin and Castilian were made to act on Tagalog, precipitating it as a useful instrument for evangelization. The missionaries in doing so were following the tradition laid down by Antonio de Nebrija’s 1492 grammar of Castilian, which had established Latin as the grammatical basis for the reconstruction of the Spanish vernacular. They learned Tagalog only by first encoding it within an historically and genetically alien structure. Such a move was conceivable on the basis of what the Spaniards believed was the existence of a nonarbiterary hierarchy of languages. Latin was seen to serve as the structural model for the recodification of all the vernaculars in the world to the extent that it was the universal language of the Church. In Spain itself, while Castilian became the dominant language of the *imperio*, Latin continued to function as the privileged means for communicating what the Augustinian theologian-poet, Fray Luis de León called the *gravedad*, or gravity, of the Same Truth. That Tagalog should be organized around the matrix of Latin was thus a function of the Spanish belief in the proximity of Latin to God’s Word.

But while Tagalog was encoded with reference to Latin grammar, its translation was expressed in Castilian. *Vocabularios* as such were always Castilian-Tagalog or vice versa, never Latin-Tagalog. In this sense, Castilian occupied the mediating position between the language of God and that of the *indios*, serving as a passage from Latin grammar to Tagalog speech. This was why Castilian words could fill in for terms lacking in Tagalog where the translation of the faith was concerned. For the missionaries, *Dios* could not be

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translated into bathala (deity), binyag (to give one a new name) into bautizar. Castilian thus initiated not only the movement of translation; it also instituted a notion of untranslatability. What this underscores is, once again, the Spanish investment in a linguistic hierarchy wherein only certain words were adequate to express Christian concepts. The activity of translation coupled with the notion of untranslatability resulted in the subordination of Tagalog as a mere derivative of Latin and Castilian; it became therefore merely an instance of the divine production of signs in the world. Just as conversion and colonization were meant to reclaim the fallen souls of the natives by subduing them in accordance with the laws of God and king, translation was believed to be instrumental in construing the local language as yet another set of signs that could be returned—or ‘reduced,’ as the Spaniards were wont to say—to the putative source and final destination of all things: the Father.

Given the foregoing considerations, it is not unwarranted to find a pervasive complicity between language and power where conversion is concerned. As we saw earlier, confession, the epitome of conversion, was meant to compel the native penitent to produce a past in relation to the Christian history of salvation. Confessional discourse was structured in such a way that the convert’s narrative of sin was filled with the syntax of Christian wishfulness. Similarly, the coherence of Tagalog as a linguistic system could be made apparent only when it had been converted into the grammatical grid of Latin. In both confession and translation, the Spanish priest and language played a peculiar role. Together they served as the third term working to achieve the transposition of native speech into the structure of Latin on the one hand, and the conversion of native bodies into suppliant speakers of God’s Word on the other. Thus did a linguistic hierarchy predicate the politicoreligious structure of authority within the colonial context. Just as the working of conversion betrays the Spanish concept of submission, the operation of translation and its negative underbelly, untranslatability, encodes Spanish ideas regarding the representation of power.

But what of the Tagalogs? Confronted with Spanish attempts to encode their bodies, souls, and language as aspects of the divine Word, how did they respond? We know from missionary accounts that despite an initial and short-lived reluctance, the overwhelming majority of Tagalogs “readily received” Christianity. What might conversion to the faith have meant for them? What

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10 See, for example, the accounts of Diego de Bobadilla, S.J., “Relation of the Philippine Islands, 1640,” in The Philippine Islands, 1493–1898, Emma Blair and Alexander Robertson, eds. (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1903–9); XLIIV, 295ff.; Pedro Chirino, S.J., Relacion de las Islas Filipinas (Rome: n.p., 1604); Pedro Murillo Velarde, “Jesuit Missions in the Seventeenth Century,” in Philippine Islands, Blair and Robertson, eds., XLIIV, 32ff. Using far less military force than they did in the New World (and meeting with much less resistance from the natives as well), the Spaniards succeeded in converting over half a million people in the islands while retaining less than 300 missionaries by the first half of the seventeenth century. Whatever reluctance existed on the part of the lowland, non-Islamised populace seems to have been overcome rapidly. This was particularly true among the Tagalogs. See Phelan, Hispanization, 8–9, 56.
drew them to the signs of Christianity in the absence of external and purely coercive Spanish measures? Did the terms of Tagalog submission coincide with or substantially differ from missionary expectations, and how and to what extent?

Although admittedly these are broad questions to which comprehensive answers are not possible, we can sketch some ways in which the problematics of Tagalog response to conversion might be approached.

Students of Philippine history are aware of the difficulties involved in arriving at distinctly native reactions to Spanish rule prior to the nineteenth century. The vast majority of sources for the early colonial period were written in Spanish by and for the colonizers rather than the colonized. The tendentiousness of these documents thus tends either to obscure native perceptions or subordinate these to Spanish intentions. There are, however, also those reams and reams of devotional texts—confessionarios, prayer books, sermons, catechisms, etcetera—written in the vernacular by the missionaries that were meant to solicit and maintain native adherence to the faith.

What we want to suggest here is the possibility of reading these missionary texts in Tagalog against the grain of their ostensible meaning—that is, to read them not simply in terms of the message that the Spaniards intended them to convey, but in terms of how they might have been received by the Tagalogs who heard them. This textual strategy is warranted by a feature that Tagalog shares with all other languages: the arbitrary connection between a word and its range of possible referents. As evinced in the vocabularios compiled by the missionaries, the native vernacular tended to give rise to associated references in addition to the Spanish-Christian meanings that they were meant to translate. This is further complicated by the fact that clerical discourse in Tagalog was often permeated with untranslatable words having no prior link to Tagalog culture. Breaking into the fabric of the vernacular, these opaque words lent themselves to a semantic drift that did not guarantee the appearance of the message of Christianity. The point to be stressed here is the possibility of detecting a Tagalog response operating within the structure of their language as it was recorded by the missionary lexicographers—a response that would alternately invite and evade the force of the Christian message that the vernacular was conscripted to bear. In such a way would language put into question rather than, as the Spaniards expected, merely affirm the project of conversion.

To convey a sense of this circumstance, we might first examine the missionary practice of grafting untranslatable Christian-Spanish words into the vernacular text. As noted earlier, this was meant to safeguard the purity of the concepts behind these terms from any possible confusion with existing native beliefs. Yet, their insertion into the vernacular texts necessitated their subjection not only to the syntax of Tagalog but also to its unforeseeable semantic effects. As signifiers with no definite signifieds in Tagalog, such words lent
themselves to a whole range of associations. Once again, we can turn to the *confessionario* quoted above, that from Fray Sebastian Totanes’s *Manual*, to see how this works. In this instance, it is helpful to see both the Tagalog and Spanish texts, bearing in mind that the English translation tries as closely as possible to approximate the Tagalog rather than the Spanish text. The following is what the missionary is advised to say about communion to a convert receiving last rites:

66. Anacco, tayong lahat na Christiano,y, ynootosan nang P. Dios at nang Santa Iglesiang Ina nating maquinabang cun magcocomulgar tou-ing mey panganib ang ating buhay. . . . Ytong paquinabang na yto,y, pinangalang Viatico, na cun baga sa uicang Tag-alog ay Bauon nang mey paroronang malayo. Pabauon nga nang Santa Iglesia sa tawong mey saquet na malubha ylong camahal-mahalang na Sacramento nang pag-cocomulgar, namacatatapang at mac-alalacas sa taou sa pag-cacabanalan at sa paglalaban sa manga toc-so nang diablong maraya.

66. Hijo mio, Dios nuestro Señor y la Santa Iglesia nos manda comulgar quando hay peligro de muerte. . . . A este comulgar llaman Viático, que quiere decir: Provisión para el que tiene que hacer Viage largo. Provee la Santa Iglesia al Hombre enfermo con este Santissimo Sacramento para el Viage dela eternidad para fortalecerle en la Fé, en la Esperanza, y en la Charidad, para que exercite las Virtudes y resista con valor a las tentaciones de demonio.

66. My child, all of us who are Christians are ordered by our Lord God and by our Mother Church to avail ourselves of communion every time our lives are in danger. . . . This useful thing is called Viatico, which in the Tagalog language is the *bauon* of those who are going on a long journey. This is the provision that the Mother Church gives to the seriously sick person, this most blessed Sacrament of communion, that endows one with bravery and strength in order to reach holiness and to fight against the temptations of the devil.¹¹

In listening to the priest’s talk, the convert about to receive communion as part of the last rites is bombarded with a remarkable number of untranslatable words. Against the impending threat of death, the Spanish formulation is unequivocal in situating ritual discourse as that which brings to the convert the Sign of God, the *Viatico*, or host. It is the host that ransoms the individual from the finality of death as it fortifies him or her in faith, hope, and charity with which to resist the devil.

In the Tagalog text, however, while the word *Viatico* is retained, it slides into the register of *bauon*, which is the food that one takes on a journey. The nature of this journey is itself problematic. Whereas the Spanish speaks of it in terms of eternity (*eternidad*), implying the abolition of prior history, the Tagalog is rendered as *paroronang malayo*, long journey, which leaves

unspecified the points of departure and arrival. What the Viatico as bauon does is similarly equivocal. In the Tagalog, it gives one neither “faith, hope, and charity” (Fe, Esperanza y Charidad) but “bravery” and “strength.” The words used here are tapang and lacas, respectively, neither of which contains any kind of moral or theological connotation. Instead, tapang and lacas both denote the capacity to release energy, which in the passage above is directed at achieving cabanalangan, “holiness,” and resisting tocso, “temptation.” Yet the word cabanalangan, from the root word banal, also means “to become disconcerted, disjointed, confused”; tocso, on the other hand, also refers to questions, interruptions, and jokes. There is a sense then in which the Tagalog text could be read in a way that would be considerably at odds with Spanish expectations. The appearance of Viatico leads one to think not of the means to transmute death into the passage to eternal life, but of provisions to be taken on an indeterminate journey. These provisions could be valued for the protection they supply against the danger of interruptions and confusions outside, particularly from the confusion of “spirits” believed to cause illness, and from the interruption of life by death.

In another passage, Totanes’s text speaks of the efficacy of evoking the “sweet names” (catamistamisang pangalan/dulcissimos nombres) of Jesus and Mary in resisting temptations of the body. It urges the convert to

| Gamitin mo, t, houag bituan iton sandata, at manalo ca ngani sa lahat na manga caauay mo. . . . Si Jesus nang si Jesus, si Maria nang si Maria ang iyong uuiucain, ang iyong tuturan sa saybuturan nang loombmo at sa bibigmon naman. . . . Mapga-Mariaismo nang Mapga-Mariaismo ca hanhan sa dica maapatdan nang hininga. | Usa de esos poderosa arma, no la sueltas no la dejes, y vencerás ciertamente a todos sus enemigos. . . . JesusMaria, JesusMaria es lo que en cada respiracion has de decir con el corazon, y con la boca tambien. . . . Repite continuamente estas Santisimos y Dulcissimos Nombres de Jesus y de Maria mientras tengas vida. | Use these and do not let go of this weapon, so that you might triumph against all your enemies. . . . Jesus and Jesus, Mary and Mary is what you should say, and what you will have in each breath of your soul and on your mouth as well. . . . Repeat again and again Jesusmaria, Jesusmaria while you have the breath to do so. 12 |

Here, the names of Jesus and Mary are regarded as powerful weapons that can be used to ward off the threat of danger. Their efficacy consists entirely in their repetition not as two names but one, JesusMaria. The repeated utterance of the name drains it of any extralinguistic content to the point of converting it into an opaque sign that shelters the speaker from external harm. What this amounts to is a recasting of the Christian Sign into something that can be torn

12 Ibid., 50–51.
away from the linguistic commerce that originates from and returns to the Father. It is instead rendered into an amulet-like object that does not result in the subjection of the speaker to the language of God. In fact, the very opposite occurs. The name of the Sign is converted into a weapon that distances the self not only from the claims of death, but from the law which pretends to control it.

All of this is suggestive of some of the ways in which the idea of un-translatability tends to undercut rather than promote the comprehension of the Christian concept when it is transferred onto the vernacular. Similarly, the translation practice of adapting native terms to fit Christian contexts added a further problematical dimension to the project of conversion. In illuminating this point, it is instructive to look at Spanish attempts to translate the Tagalog terms of reciprocity.

Inhabiting the vernacular texts that the priest addressed to the converts is a notion of reciprocity that is culturally specific to the Tagalogs. In communicating humankind’s generalized indebtedness to the Father for having made of His Son the ‘gift’ that ensured their salvation, Spanish writers constantly employed the Tagalog idioms of utang na loob, ‘debt of gratitude,’ and hiya, ‘shame.’ In numerous devotional texts, one’s submission to God and dependence on Christ were invariably phrased in terms of an utang-na-loob relationship, while sorrow and repentance for one’s sins were rendered as a feeling of hiya for having been remiss in paying one’s debts to the Father. Similarly, God is said to have given His own loob to the converts through Christ, expecting them to return their own loob to Him. Damnation, in this case, is the permanent separation of human from divine loob, thus marking the end of all utang-na-loob ties between the two.13

As parts of a constellation of ‘values’ among the peoples in the Tagalog areas, utang na loob and hiya have attracted considerable attention from scholars since the 1960s. Among the most influential works are those written by Charles Kaut14 and Mary Hollnsteiner15. Set along the lines of structural-functionalist theory, their analyses of these values have been rightly criticized for being ahistorical. As Reynaldo Ileto has cogently pointed out, studies of

13 See, for example, the devotional texts of Fray Alonso de Santa Ana, Explicacion de la doctrina christiana en la lengua tagala (Manila, 1672; Manila: Imprenta de los Amigos del Pais, 1853), 112; Fray Pedro de Herrera, Meditaciones con manga mahal na Pagninilay na sadya sa Sanctong Pag Exercicios (Manila, 1645; Manila: La Imprenta de la Compania de IHS, 1762), folio 8; Fray Francisco Blancas de San José, Librong Pinagpalamanan yito nang aasalin nang tawo que satin Christiano . . . . 3d ed. (Manila: n.p., 1662), 282–83; 370. For a more thorough listing of other devotional texts popular in the seventeenth century, see Rafael, “Contracting Christianity,” ch. 3.


utang na loob and hiya that exclude history end up depoliticizing reciprocity by failing to consider the place of conflict in the Tagalog processes of exchange and indebtedness.\textsuperscript{16} Ileto goes on to resituate these ideas of reciprocity in the peasant movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He convincingly demonstrates the revolutionary potential of utang na loob as constantly invoked in the Tagalog literature of this period, as well as in the writings of messianic leaders as they rallied followers in a series of uprisings against Spain and later the United States. But while Ileto’s work is a significant departure from Kaut and Hollnsteiner, it nonetheless tends to join them in regarding the loob in utang na loob as a privileged, a priori entity.\textsuperscript{17} In this sense, loob is regarded as connoting the core of Tagalog being, as that which is part of, yet apart from, processes of exchange.

It is of critical importance to hold on to Ileto’s insight regarding reciprocity as that which is always predicated on the possibility of conflict and disruption. However, in considering the historical effects of utang na loob and hiya in the context of conversion, it is important to try to circumvent partially both a phenomenological and a purely operational definition of loob, one that designates the “inside” that is staked in a Tagalog debt transaction. This might be done by re-examining loob first of all as a linguistic fact, as a signifier which attaches itself to a variety of mutually exclusive signifieds. It is the process of making loob into a motivated sign that precisely lends it value and force, situating it as a cultural term in a larger historical field. However, in tracing the diverse meanings of loob, we also get a sense of its semiotic instability, which Spanish translations sought to limit but could not fully contain.

In the missionary texts, loob is charged with the task of carrying the weight of such Western concepts as “soul,” “will,” and “conscience.” Loob, along with a host of other Tagalog terms—sisi (repentance), casalanann (sin), aua (pity), to cite only a few—were meant to bear the burden of all those cherished metaphysical and theological concepts that would allow for the imposition of Spanish rule both inside and outside the natives’ minds. However, if we turn to other sorts of missionary texts—the vocabularios and the early twentieth-century diccionarios modelled after them—we get a sense of the semantic diversity of loob. In the 1613 vocabulario of Fray Pedro de San Buenaventura, loob is defined as “inside,” “to go inside,” “an interior room in a house,” in addition to the Spanish constructs “will” and “heart.” In Fray Juan de Noceda and Fray Pedro San Lucar’s 1745 vocabulario and Pedro Serrano-Laktaw’s 1914 diccionario,\textsuperscript{18} these definitions appear along with other connotations of loob. On the one hand, it is defined as lo mas


\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 331.

*interno*, the most interior part of the person, hence the seat of taste and desire; on the other hand, it is also the mere "inside" of any object, as in *looban*, the inside of a house, the ground on which it is built, the floor of a building, the yard which marks off the space between house and street. In this sense, *loob* is not a privileged "inside" that defines being, but an "inside" that signals an interval separating one object from another, or one part of the object from its other parts. *Looban* can also function as a verb to mean the act of attacking and sacking a house. Rendered as *ipaloob* or *pagpapaloob*, it pertains to the insertion of one object into another, its enclosure and concealment from the gaze of those outside. The verb form of *loob* indicates the consequence of a prior displacement of objects from the outside, either through exchange or robbery. There is a sense then in which there is nothing natural or spontaneous about what is inside, for what is inside is constituted by things that have been shifted there from the outside or *labas*. The "inside" and "outside" thus tend to be situated in terms of one being at the interval of the other. This is further reflected by the inflection of *loob* into *pangloob*, under clothes, which serves as an interior layer between the outer clothes and the body. It is also the same word used to mean the inside of a cage used for fishing along a river bank, and as a kind of trap for rats. This is a further extension of the sense of *loob* as the space for the containment of things that come from the outside.

However, it should be noted that the "inside" of things is also thought of to lend itself to a similar process of displacement outside. This is shown by the fact that *loob* is at the root of one of the words for "to give," *ipagcaloob*, while the word for "gift" itself is *caloob*, literally part of the inside of something. From this it seems that *loob* is juxtaposed with, rather than dialectically opposed to *labas*, "the outside." In being attached to the word for debt (*utang*), *loob* figures as both the site and the object of exchange. It is constituted by objects in circulation just as it functions to represent the desired form of circulation. *Utang na loob* from this perspective is not only a "debt of gratitude" but also a debt of, from and for the "inside," as indicated by the particle *na*. The *loob* that is staked in a debt transaction is therefore an "inside" that is also an interior surface, a container as well as that which is contained, but only to the extent that it is already oriented towards an external process of exchange.

*Loob* is important not because it invariably designates a "soul"—as the Spaniards would have wanted it to—at the core of being. Its significance lies in the way it marks out the space within which objects and signs from the outside could be accumulated and from which and toward which they could be issued in payment of a debt. In *utang-na-loob* transactions, the *loob* that one places in circulation is one which is detachable and re-attachable, not one which sums up the self in its totality. This is to say that where the Tagalog idea of indebtedness is concerned, *loob* is precipitated in the process of exchange, not prior to it. It is therefore not an anterior state that stands in a
superior position to the mechanism of debt transactions. Rather it is that which can be known and realized only in the process of indebtedness. To reduce loob, as the Spaniards did, to a question of intentionality and the locus of guilt and repentance would be to assume that it stands behind and above the terms of reciprocity. But as the various inflections of loob suggest, what is implicated in utang-na-loob transactions is neither an originary source of gifts nor a privileged interiority accountable for its debts.

If a sense of subjectivity does not determine exchange, constraining one to enter into a reciprocal network of indebtedness with others, what does? In the context of utang na loob, it is the concept of hiya. From the early seventeenth century to the present day, hiya has been defined as the appropriate affect that accompanies indebtedness. Yet, it is also that which arises from the sensed exclusion from a circuit of debt relations.

Often translated as “shame,” hiya, like loob, can take on a wide variety of significations. The feeling of hiya is one that is also characterized by irritation and vexation at being made into an object of amusement or into a foil for someone else’s aggrandizement. The act of subjecting one to this state of “shame” is called hiyaiin, that is, to mock, to jest, to disconcert and confuse, and, figuratively, to slap and trample upon. To this extent, to be in a state of hiya is to be in a vulnerable position as one available for an other’s blows, whether physical or verbal. For this reason, the feeling of hiya involves experiencing a certain kind of embarrassment that arises from being unduly overwhelmed (empachar). The negative aspect of hiya appears as the sense of being unable to fend off signs that come from the outside by performing a response adequate to what one has received, that is, the sense of the unregulated and undeserved reception of signs and things from the outside. The displeasure produced by the feeling of hiya therefore comes from being made to think of all the things one would have wanted to give back in return but cannot, as well as all those things that one would have wanted to receive but is no longer able to request.

But insofar as hiya is an essential component of utang na loob, it also has a positive register. This is shown by the term magbigay hiya, “to render respect,” “to consider and honor someone.” Reflective of this is the Tagalog saying, Ang tauong kulang sa hiya, walang halaga ang wika, “One who lacks hiya is one whose words have no value.”19 Hiya gives value to words proffered in discursive exchange, just as it is the dominant affect that arises from sensing one’s failure to return what has been received. Here lies the ambiguity of “shame.” On the one hand, it is the condition of possibility for indebtedness whereby to have no hiya is to have no utang na loob. Indeed, as studies of Tagalog reciprocity indicate, the worst denigration possible is to characterize an individual as being walang hiya, “without shame,” which is

19 Ibid., 333.
synonymous with *walang utang na loob,* “without any sense of indebted-ness.” On the other hand, *hiya* also represents the rupture in debt transactions, filling one with confusion and a deep sense of helplessness in relation to the outside. *Hiya* thus colors the entire spectrum of indebtedness, signalling both its operation and its failure. It is from fear of public “shame,” that is, of being excluded from a network of exchange vis-à-vis the outside, that one accedes to *utang-na-loob* ties, for without the fear of *hiya,* the *labas,* or outside, would remain unknown. Consequently, the *loob* or inside could never be put into circulation. Participation in exchange is conceivable only to the extent that one is successful in blocking the surge of *hiya.* *Utang-na-loob* ties are valued precisely insofar as they allow one to contain the negative and undesirable affect and effect of *hiya,* converting them instead into an element that infuses what is given up in return. Reciprocity in terms of *hiya* and *utang na loob* is thus ordered toward anticipating and domesticating the ever-present possibility of being deluged by an uncontrollable rush of signs from the outside. For if one were incapable of knowing *hiya,* one would end up being “shocked” by it to the point of being cut off from exchange. And without exchange, no sense of an “inside” or *loob* would emerge.

What we want to hypothesize here is that to the extent that Christianity was phrased in the idiom of *hiya* and *utang na loob,* Tagalogs felt constrained to attend to it. Caught up in what seemed like an unending stream of unfamiliar and untranslatable words put forth in the familiar terms of reciprocal obligation, the natives “converted,” that is, availed themselves of the sacraments as a way of entering into a debt transaction with the Spaniards and their God. The Tagalog interest in contracting Christianity stemmed from their fear of being overcome by *hiya*—of being barraged by gifts and signs that they might not be able to “read” and would be unable to “control.” Yet the terms of this contract differed between ruler and ruled. The Tagalog notion of reciprocity spelled a crucial difference in the terms of indebtedness that conversion entailed. One way of getting a sense of that difference is to consider the matter of confession.

The validity of confession, as we have seen, largely depended on a procedure of accounting for one’s sins. But while insisting on a rigorous accounting, the missionaries also demanded that the conversion of sins into a narrative be as straightforward and free from deviation as possible. But as missionary accounts indicate, native converts tended to be much more concerned with the possibility that confession presented for embarking on a

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20 We read, for example, the following exhortation to the native convert in Totanes’s *Manual:*

116. S/he must straighten his/her sentences, open his/her *loob,* arrange his/her words, relate all of his/her sins, their number, their extent, their gravity; and if it were to be compared to walking [the telling of sins] should take to the middle road rather than fork out in various directions; tell and relate everything so that the Lord God might know what is in your *loob* (p. 82).
discursive exchange than with getting to and at the point of that exchange. Why this should be the case has to do with the nature of payment involved in utang-na-loob relationships.

Studies of Tagalog reciprocity have often stressed the seeming inequality built into debt transactions. The hierarchy that is precipitated by indebtedness is based on the sensed incommensurability between the gift received and the gift returned, particularly if the former is an unsolicited one. Prototypical of this is the debt relationship obtaining between mother and child. The child is said to have an utang na loob to its mother (and never the reverse) by virtue of having received from her the unexpected gift of life. It is assumed that the child will never fully be able to repay this debt. Instead, it is expected to spend its life giving token recognition of this debt to the mother by means of what might be described as partial payments in the form “respect” (paggalang). But respect as a form of token recognition tends to be most explicit on the level of discourse. This is evinced by the use of words of deference when addressing the mother—or any other parental figure—such as ho and po. These terms are usually attached to words directed to the figure of authority, as in Ano po ang gusto ninyo? “What do you want (sit/madam)?” By themselves, ho and po refer to nothing in particular. Only when they are inserted in the interval—or loob—of words directed at one’s parents and elders do they take on significance in that they convey the existence of “respect.” To this extent, they are also the signs of the existence of utang-na-loob ties that would otherwise remain unarticulated. Aside from this expression of deference, children usually do not have set tasks around the household. Only when they have become adults are they expected to take care of their parents. The burden of indebtedness thus falls upon the child who even as it enters adulthood never stops owing its loob to the parent. As Hollnsteiner puts it, “Nothing [the child] can do during its lifetime can make up for what [the mother] has done for it.”

The intrinsic inequality of debt relationships comes across as benign where a mother and her child are concerned. However, it can take on much more pressing political overtones when it is transferred to other social contexts. For example, where the traditional forms of landlord-tenant ties are concerned, Hollnsteiner makes the following pertinent observations:

In the landlord-tenant relationship . . . the tenant knows he cannot approach anywhere near an equivalent return. As long as he fulfills his expected duties towards his landlord and shows by bringing a few dozen eggs and helping out in festive occasions that he recognizes a debt of gratitude (utang na loob), he may continue to expect benefits from his landlord. The tenant receives uninterrupted preferential treatment despite the fact that he never reciprocates with interest and never reverses the debt relationships.

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22 Hollnsteiner. “Reciprocity.” 76.
23 Ibid., 74.
The hierarchical relationship between landlord and tenant (at least on a conceptual level) arises because of the inability of the latter to override the gifts of the former. What underwrites the continuation of exchange between the two is the nature of the payment. The tenant is expected to do no more than render token signs of his or her indebtedness to the landlord. Partial payments ensure that a continous flow of gifts from above will accrue to those below. Such payments have no set form. Neither are they subject to a rigorous schedule. Instead, the nature and frequency of payments depend more on the creditor’s whim and the debtor’s resources. Reciprocity in this case maintains a hierarchy to the extent that the full payment of debts can always be—indeed, must be—deferred.

The imperative to defer full payment in favor of tokens of indebtedness makes for a peculiar contract. Among the Spaniards, the contraction of debt obligations between two parties was always articulated with reference to a third party that stood outside of the exchange yet determined its contours. Whether figured as God, the king, the state, or the law, this third agent served as the central figure in all negotiations, acting as the origin, interpreter, and enforcer of the terms governing exchange. It was thus invested with the sense of being the source of hierarchy just as it was the source of all gifts. It was also within the province of the transcendent third term to insist on specific kinds of payments in return for the benefits it had given its subjects. In the context of Spanish colonization these payments would consist of such things as taxes, forced labor, the ritual observance of sacraments, etcetera. Furthermore, the specified amounts of payments were always coordinated with a timetable of sorts: monthly tax rolls, weekly masses, annual confessions, and so forth. This made for a system of indebtedness that was posited on the possibility and inevitability of full payment, for ultimately all debts contracted by the individual within the law culminated in death. Death was the last horizon of exchange. And where evangelization was concerned, it marked the moment of irrevocable reckoning of all of one’s accumulated debts in the presence of an infinite creditor.

In utang-na-loob ties, by contrast, the tripartite structure of the Spanish contract gives way to a different configuration. The contracting of debts, given the non-originary source and destination of gifts (loob) and the practice of token payments, is premised not on the sanction of a transcendent third term but precisely on its elision. The possibility of eliding the third term has a linguistic basis. Like other Malayo-Polynesian languages, Tagalog has two pronouns to indicate the first person plural, “we.” These are cami, the “exclusive we,” and tayo, the “inclusive we.” Cami is that which makes it conceivable to articulate a transaction between a self and an other that arises from the exclusion of a third party. In this case, one speaks of maintaining utang-na-loob ties that are predicated upon a negative consideration of those who are outside such ties. Such is indicated in expressions recorded in eighteenth-
century dictionaries, as in Cami.y, nagpapautangan nang loob, “We are indebted to each other (and not to them)” or “We are contracting debts with one another (and not with them),” and Hindi nagpapautang loob siya sa aquin, “S/he does not want to be indebted to me.” The forging of obligations thus becomes a matter between loobs rather than between individuals before the law.24

The effect of this elision is to render the hierarchy obtaining in utang-na-loob ties explicitly arbitrary. This is to say that relationships of indebtedness are not instituted by an absolute source of debts making itself felt through a progressive chain of signs. The arbitrariness of hierarchy in this instance comes from the tenuous link it is thought to have with the figure of authority from which gifts come. The token payments of debts are made not in order to memorialize authority and thereby consolidate hierarchy. Rather, token returns are meant simply to loosen the pressures from above, resulting in the deflection of the full force of hierarchy.

Conversely, the failure to make partial payments signals one’s failure to “read” in the gift the return that is demanded, leading to the outbreak of hiya. It is the moment when one is taken up by a violent onrush of signs that makes it impossible to have a sense of loob that could be offered in exchange. Hollnsteiner in discussing a Visayan analogue of hiya, way ibalus, cites a popular saying:

A beggar prays for the good health of whoever gives him alms, and a dog barks for his master, but a way ibalus does not even have a prayer or a bark for his benefactor.25

This indicates that the eruption of hiya leaves the individual speechless, utterly unable to return that which has been received from the other. It is in the interest of containing hiya that one is thus constrained to reciprocate a gift and thereby elude the potentially confounding and disconcerting force of hierarchy. Tagalog reciprocity then is a matter of “reading” into the gift that one receives not so much its source but, more important, the return that is expected. Within a Christian-colonial context, the idea of utang na loob furnished the Tagalog converts a way of conceiving relations of inequality that would sporadically displace the demands issuing from the totalizing hierarchy of Spanish Christianity.

This was perhaps why the Tagalogs responded enthusiastically to the signs

24 This would not be surprising given the nature of Tagalog sociopolitical structure on the eve of Spanish colonization. Living in coastal village settlements called barangays, the Tagalogs did not have anything approaching a centralized state apparatus. Instead, they were led by village chieftains called datu: the chieftain’s position was the result of a series of reciprocal ties that he (only men could be datu) could cultivate among the people in the village rather than of the sanction of any outside realm. As such, no institution of kingship, supravillage confederation, elaborate legal code, or organized system of worship adhered to the Tagalogs prior to the arrival of Spain in the Philippines. See William Henry Scott’s brilliant essay, “Filipino Class Structure in the Sixteenth Century”, in his Cracks in the Parchment Curtain and Other Essays in Philippine History (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1982). 96–126.

of Christianity, particularly to the sacraments, such as penance. Missionary writers often spoke of the avidity with which native converts turned to confession. The idiom of *utang na loob* and *hiya* riveted the natives’ attention not to its sacramental value, however. Instead, it drew native converts toward the discursive machinery of confession as a means of contracting and extending ties of reciprocity with those who had a surplus of signs. By availing themselves of the sacraments, Tagalogs afforded themselves opportunities for negotiating around Spanish demands and thus avoiding the shock of *hiya* when confronted by them. It was perhaps because of this that hearing native confessions was, as the Jesuit Murillo Velarde writes, “to enter into a labyrinth without a clue.”26 Upon asking for an exhaustive accounting of the penitent’s past, the missionaries were beset by a series of digressions, non sequiturs, and even displays of braggadocio. Fray Blancas de San José’s exhortations to the Tagalogs give ample evidence of this:

> Despite all the admonitions and examples of the Priest, why do so many of you persist in such twists and turns, in such obscurities and deviations in your *loob* so that your sentences are contaminated with these same obscurities; how you should be ashamed (*mahiya*) of yourselves for engaging in riddles (*nagbobotongan*) during confession.27

The twists and turns of native confession are said to take on the quality of riddles (*bogtong*). Native riddles were recorded by missionary lexicographers in their efforts to illustrate word usage in Tagalog. The riddles seem to have existed prior to the Spanish conquest, and they continued in circulation, many remaining unchanged, throughout the Spanish period and up to the present day. Such riddles, or *bogtong*, were also staple components of Tagalog literature during the Spanish colonial period, and the Spanish accounts note their popularity. Tagalogs were given to trading riddles in a game called *magbogtongan* during fiestas, funeral wakes, weddings, and even while engaged in such mundane tasks as tending their fields. These games were not contests in the sense of having winners and losers; rather, the delight in trading riddles came from the way in which they presented an opportunity for showing one’s ability to generate semantic slippages that decontextualized words from their everyday usages. We see this in the following examples:

> **Riddle:** A little lake bounded by a bamboo fence.
> **Answer.** An eye.
> **Riddle.** By day a bamboo tube, by night a sea.
> **Answer.** A sleeping mat.28

The responses “eye” and “sleeping mat” have no necessary connections to a “lake bounded by a bamboo fence” or “bamboo tube” and “sea.”

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28 Bienvenido Lumbara, “Poetry of the Early Tagalogs,” *Philippine Studies*, 16 (1968), 223–30, has an extended discussion of the prosodic features of the Tagalog *bogtong*. 
pleasure of *bogtongs* comes from the way they shift the referent of a word away from its functional connotations, creating for it another constellation of associations. Hence, “‘mat’” is seen not in association with sleeping but with the sea at night, and “‘eye’” is brought in touch not with seeing but with the bounded area of a lake. By converting the discourse of sin into a game of *bogtongan*, the native penitent took confession to be an invitation to display his or her ability to return conundrums in exchange for other conundrums received from the priest. In lieu of a straight narrative, the confessors got back what seemed a bewildering show of the penitent’s verbal dexterity.

Adding to this bewilderment was the natives’ propensity to tell not their own sins but those of others:

And others seriously go astray when they tell to the Priest the sins of their wives, or their sons-in-law, or their mother-in-law, while their own sins rarely cross their lips; the only reason why they go to the Priest is in order to denounce to him all the people they dislike.\(^\text{29}\)

What occurs here is that the self that confesses turns its focus not on its own sins but on those of others. Rather than assume the responsibility for one’s sins—as the acts which originate from one’s “‘own’” *loob*—there is a move to appropriate even the sins of others as offerings that might appease the figure of authority. In other passages Blancas complains of the tendency to blame others, including neighbors, wives, and even the *demonio*, for one’s sins. Tagalog penitents thus were far from attaching a sense of ownership to their sins inasmuch as sins were not attached to a “‘soul’” but to the *loob*. This suggests that the imperative for the internalization of guilt and repentance prescribed by the missionaries was liable to be circumvented by the natives. Instead, confessional discourse remained suspended in the economy of *utang na loob* and *hiya*. From this perspective it is not surprising to hear that confession was used as well for displays of braggadocio:

One other great error that others commit in their confession is that they only speak of their great deeds, while never speaking about their sins [and] the only reason they go [to confession] is to honor their own goodness.\(^\text{30}\)

To brag about one’s goodness (*cabanalan*) results in by-passing the demand for a narrative of sin. In effect, it subverted the entire conceptual apparatus of confession. Instead of submitting to the law in recounting accumulated transgressions against it, native penitents converted confession into a receptacle for boasting and protestations of innocence. In this sense, the *loob* that is offered as payment for one’s debt in confession ends up submitting to the representatives of the law while simultaneously relegating the law itself into the margins of exchange.

\(^{29}\) Blancas de San José, *Librong* 245–47.

To the Spanish demand that converts make their bodies speak the language of God, the Tagalog tendency was to respond by performing token payments designed to appease the figures of authority and deflect the force of hierarchy. This involved eluding the internalization of the interrogative language of the law carried by the insistent voice of the dominant other. The turn to confessional discourse—as most probably to the other sacraments—was motivated in part, as we have argued, by the fear of hiya and the desire to establish utang-na-loob ties with those at the top of the colonial hierarchy. From this perspective, it is possible to postulate the emergence of one type of Tagalog conversion: one that involved confession without ‘‘sin,’’ of submission without translation. Conversion where the Tagalogs were concerned during this period would then have occurred as an après coup response to the unsolicited and therefore ‘‘shocking’’ gift of signs that the Spaniards ‘‘bestowed’’ on them. In taming this shock, Tagalogs resorted to the familiar terms of hiya and utang na loob that accompanied the transfer of Spanish signs in the vernacular. Converting conversion and confusing confession, Tagalogs ‘‘submitted’’ while at the same time hollowing out the Spanish call to submission.