

## Thoughts on Time

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hinaharap natin ang kinabukasan

The baybayin text above reads: *hinaharap natin ang kinabukasan*. It's a play on the polysemy of the Tagalog word *hinaharap* in meaning 'the future,' 'the front of something,' or 'something which we face.' According to numerous cross-linguistic studies, peoples and cultures conceptualize time in a multitude of ways: "in whether they think of time as stationary or moving, as limited or open-ended, as horizontal or vertical, as oriented from left-to-right, right-to-left, front-to-back, back-to-front, east-to-west, and so on" (Boroditsky et al., 2011, p. 123). And this manifests in the usually spatial metaphors their languages employ. From the expression above, we can see that Tagalog, and thus Tagalog speakers, have extended a spatial metaphor to conceptualize time horizontally and from back-to-front. Specifically, that the future is in front of us and is something we face; somewhat paradoxically, it is something that we could supposedly see but not foresee, for it is still unknown. It follows that the past, which we call *nagdaan* or *nakaraan* (both literally meaning 'something which has passed by / through'), is behind us. It is something we now turn our backs and eyes on, despite or because of the fact that we are more familiar with it through our memories than the very future we now face.

I'm curious as to how early language speakers naturally connected their conceptions of space with their conceptions of time, even way before the connection between the two was formalized in the field of astrophysics as 4-D spacetime. Perhaps the connection was as clear as the sky is blue—quite literally. Before the days of light pollution, human ancestors from all over the globe, in an effort to compartmentalize their routine activities and rituals, made use of their environment, the most handy and available of which are the sky and its heavenly bodies. Of course, aside from these celestial time indicators, meteorological, botanic, faunal, and bodily changes were also tracked, like how the Mangyans did for example (Postma, 1985). But I doubt that there are things more uniform than the rising and falling of the sun in a day, the phases of the moon in a month, or the shifting of the stars and constellations in a year. These made them perfect markers of regularity, reliable guides for navigation, and important symbols of expectation and stability. And as these markers in the sky moved in their own directions and speeds, I guess it becomes clearer how the associations between space and time were

made.

But space is not the only way we conceptualize time. There is also value; we ascribe value to parcels of time. Though the question of whether or not this conception is a product of more modern times (i.e., after prehistory) is up in the air. In Tagalog for example, time is something that can be wasted: *sayang ang oras* 'time is wasted.' And thus time is temporary and limited: *ubos-oras* 'out of time,' *wala nang oras* 'there is no more time'; and one can also have or possess time, albeit with acknowledgment of its transience: *may oras ako ngayon* 'I have time now,' *sa paglipas ng panahon* 'with the passage of time' (this one uses movement too). And yet it is something we willingly share or devote to others or to an activity: *pahiram ng kaunting oras* 'let me borrow your time,' *paglaanan mo ng oras* 'allot your time.' Our lives aren't as eternal as the sky, and the finite time that we borrow is what gives it value. This is even taken up a notch in English, wherein time has become a form of currency itself: *spending time*, *buy us some time*, *time is gold* (an idiom which one can argue has been borrowed into Filipino culture), and so forth.

Time and number are also intricately linked. Woods's (2011) article surveying the interplay between counting numbers and telling time from the precolonial, then the colonial, and to now the contemporary Tagalog world shows us that the local native populations had agency throughout history in choosing which foreign conceptions of time were to be accepted or "indigenized." From the get-go, it seems that the Tagalogs, at least, numbered or counted their time. Using the present as a reference point, the past and the future were numbered into seemingly measured units, for example (p. 344):

... - camacalaua - cahapon (yesterday) - ngayon (now) - bukas (tomorrow) - macalaua - ...

This applied to not just the sequence of days but also months and years. The compartmentalization of days into hours, the 7-day *domingo* system, having names for days and months, and having numbers for years were eventual innovations from Spanish influence. The local Tagalog speakers also certainly chose for themselves which aspects of the foreign concept of time fit the needs of their time.

As our construal of time in Filipino, heavily Tagalog-based as it is, becomes more complex and demanding in this day and age of productivity and *maximizing time*, we see that we Filipinos are still very much attuned to its connection with space, value, and number. The expression *Filipino Time*, whether as a flaw, a stereotype, or a mere joke, attests to this. The acknowledgment of its existence (and sometimes a *pag-angkin* of its validity) is also an acknowledgment of the value of punctuality and *respecting others' time*. Yet this habit of always being late is nowhere to be found in our conceptions or metaphorizing of time; it is simply not a function of them. Contrary to Postma (1985), I believe that Filipino time is not a remnant of old conceptions of time, "that there is no need to know the time exactly to the last minute" (p. 239), especially if the expression is applied to mostly urban and modern contexts and situations. I believe that Filipino time is less of a cognitive product as it is a product of our material conditions and poor institutions. We would do better attributing Filipino time to traffic in our dusty, unsafe car-centric roads, pedestrian-unfriendly and PWD-hostile streets, decrepit public

transport system and infrastructure, weak internet connectivity and access, and so forth instead of as an inherent trait, because as we can see in our language, we Filipinos are aware, calculated, and sensitive when it comes to time.

In time, we hope that Filipino time will be nothing but a thing of the past. We look for drastic improvements in our standard of living conditions in the future. But as we face our uncertain *hinaharap*, it would no longer be enough to simply *look forward* to it, at some point we have to begin moving forward in that direction as well, and that point may as well be now.

## References

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