

The Samareño Social Elite and the Damaged Environment

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Abstract

This paper aims to elucidate the relationship between the Filipino (Samareño) social elite and its environment through review of literature. It theorizes that the prevailing condition of Samar ecology is affected by the kind of attitude and behaviour of the elite members of Samar society, and illustrates how various aspects of society: government, economy, and culture can damage the environment.

Keywords: Samareño, Samar, society, poverty, governance, politics

I. INTRODUCTION

The leaders of big organizations inevitably dominate all large-scale societies known as the elite theory (Domhoff, 2005). This can be paralleled with what is happening in the countryside. The rich often provides the direction for the community. This is because the rich has the power to persuade voters to vote for them as leaders of their communities. What has the few elite done to manage the society, the environment?

It is theorized in this paper that the prevailing condition of Samar ecology is affected by the kind of attitude and behaviour of the elite members of Samar society. It also illustrates how various aspects of society as government, economy, and culture can damage the environment.

Victor Peñaranda's (1996) article The Betrayal of Maqueda Bay, vividly described and analyzed the condition of Samar province's richest marine resource, the Maqueda Bay. Peñaranda foreshadowed Maqueda Bay's fate and

its effect on the lives of its inhabitants. His paper was a confirmation of the study of Fox (1986) who, ten years earlier, asserted that Maqueda Bay was a heavily exploited area, with a density value of 98 fishermen/km.

According to Peñaranda (1996), the abuse and exploitation of its Maqueda Bay's marine resource has been controlled by local politicians in Catbalogan. These politicians have used their power and influence to take advantage of every valuable product that the bay produces—from finfishes to sardines, squid, jellyfish (bodol), blue crabs and mayahini (bi-valves). These products command high prices in the major cities both in the country and abroad. With their adroit legal background, these politicians successfully circumvented the law so as to maintain their privilege in exploiting Maqueda Bay's rich marine resource.

Every material resource has its limits (Laszlo, 1997), so does the Maqueda Bay. According to the Community Extension

and Research for Development, Inc. fish production in the area of Samar Sea in 1979 recorded 78,203 MT, and in 1991, it shrunk to 33,600 MT. Alarmed by this dismal condition, the struggle among the bay's fishers ensued. Thus, in 1986, Fox noted that there existed in the bay conflicts between small scale fishers and commercial trawlers for direct competition over the stock of fish, shrimps and crabs (Fox, 1986). Further, in 2013, data on the production of blue crab (Figure 1), portend that if this trend would continue, the blue crab industry would collapse by 2030 (BAS, 2013). This trend is true of the other species as well.

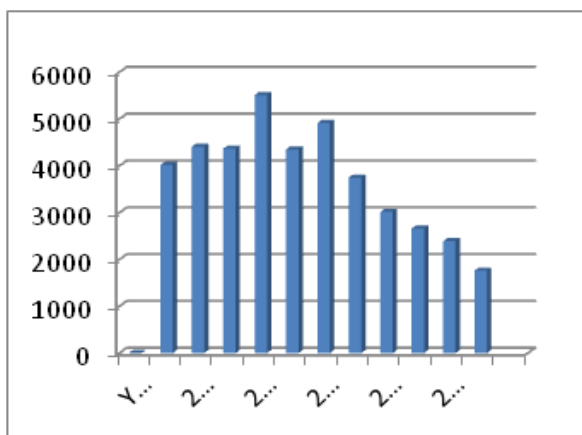


Figure 1. Municipal total production (MT) of blue swimming crab in Samar from 2002-2012 (BAS, 2013).

The environment is an entity designed not only to serve as habitat of humans, but also to provide for their source of life-giving provisions of food, natural resources, energy, and water supply. Everything that man needs in order to sustain his life. People should protect, conserve and manage its use so as to support development in a sustainable way and to ensure the life of future generations.

In order to attain their objectives, societies and institutions ought to prioritize all efforts addressed for tending and nurturance of the environment. Governments should mobilize its machinery by enacting and implementing laws that will assure the realization of this goal. Leaders of government should

not only realize the voice of the people especially their environmental concerns, but, the government should also meet expectations of the electorate. They should show the best example as a token of the people's trust in them.

But this is not the usual case. Individuals who are elected to government offices tend to take advantage of their positions and exploit all socially valuable resources for their vested interests. During election, the politically ambitious contrive every strategy for their eventual selection, and consequently overcome their opponents to achieve their goal. Thus, the presence of conflict relationships among these groups in society.

Conflict versus functional models

A society in conflict, says Marx (Marx & Engels, 1848), is composed of groups who try to influence social institutions to work for the advantage of the dominant ones, and the environmental resources for their abuse and exploitation. The aim of their activities is to achieve supremacy and dominion over all the other groups. The state of the environment will consequently be undermined if only to maintain such an entrenched social position. Because of wanton destruction and neglect, the environment meets its disaster. A community that very much depends on its environmental resources will also be severely affected. Such a society is doomed to decline and degenerate.

Comte, Durkheim and Parsons (Microsoft Encarta, 2009), see a different view. According to them, social decline results from social institutions' inability to function and serve for the welfare of all the members of society. The stability of society is a challenge and test of the workings of component institutions in their assigned roles. The institutions have the varying degrees of success and failure in their operations until they improve their

activities in every turn. It is seen that the latter state of affairs is always considered fruitful and advantageous than the former as a result of experience of similar challenges posed to it.

Social decline and the consumer culture

Democracy seems to be an ideal form of government the world over. And whatever democratic government is created, whether it is an anarchy or dictatorship, deserves its sovereign entity—the people. However, a great number of people in a democratic society do not resort to some measures of discipline necessary to buttress the will of its government. People usually think and ask what their country can do for them, and not what they can do for their country. It is particularly true of the issue of environmental conservation. Individualistic members of society seldom think of the welfare of the majority. They defy authority that requires their participation and sacrifice for the good of the majority, and they hope that any form of government would be designed for the contentment of the individual and his self-centred lifestyle. Thus, the prevailing social order transforms itself into a consumer society. In a consumer society, the tenets of greed and personal contentment reign supreme as exemplified by proliferation of wide endorsements for material comforts and enjoyments. Material and individualistic incentives become a norm in attaining group objectives in the neighbourhood, workplace, and even in the academe. In the Philippine society, materialism and individualism have effectively replaced the traditional bayanihan or gemeinschaft where people customarily offer personal and material contribution in helping a community project or activity. Rather, people are to be constantly reminded “to mind your own business” so they do not get into trouble with the “business” of others.

Democracy and the environment

As a by-product of democracy, such a materialistic and selfish mentality has developed in the character of the Samareño. He would, for instance, welcome vote buying as a mode of selecting community leaders, rather than opt for the merits and competence of one who possesses the virtues of integrity and of service for the common weal. The average Samareño does not care about his environment despite the prevailing evidence of scarcity and decline of the products harvested therefrom.

Many laws and policies for the maintenance of peace and order, environmental protection, or building public infrastructures have been passed and issued by the local government of Samar Province and its component 25 municipalities. But these legal issuances are ignored and set aside by most local executives and their cohorts as a way to exempt themselves from the pain of compliance. These officials are known to be operating their profit-making enterprises in the province while they hold the reins of political power ostensibly to serve the interest of their fellow Samareños.

From the 1950s until the 70s, Samar was quite a progressive province with its verdant forests barely exploited, its seas preserved and teeming with valuable and diverse species of fish and marine products. Its public structures are strongly built and properly maintained. Its main hospital provided effective and inexpensive medical service, and its officials unheard of being involved in large-scale graft and corrupt practices. Nowadays, the trend has changed. Many local officials have been the subject of the summons by the Ombudsman on account of conduct inimical to the public good and in betrayal of their sworn duty and responsibility as public servants. Public

funds are squandered for private and personal use. Samar's main hospital is crowded with patients miserably neglected by its staff. The island's forest almost entirely denuded by loggers operating under the sponsorship and protection of influential officials in government. And the famed Maqueda Bay has now become a dwelling place of the lowly hawol-hawol (sardines) and bodol (jellyfish). In the latter situation, illegal fishing operators together with their *alpor* partners abound in the area. Neither law enforcers nor the scourge of karma that bother these people.

Social morality and law

In observing social conditions in America, Yankelovich (2006) writes that there appears a "thinning out" of social morality among people starting from the 1960s, "where standards of right and wrong are reduced to the minimalist test of whether a particular action is legal. This observation is also true of the Philippine society. Sociologist Chester Hunt (1998) offered a significant insight into the relationship between social morality or mores and laws, when he said—"When mores are strong, there is little need for laws. But when the mores are weak, laws do not work very well." Indeed, if Samareños' attachment to social morality is strong, they need not worry about laws to govern themselves. Their concern for their common good—being itself a positive moral conviction—could serve a strong force to guide relations among members of its community and establish a wholesome and socially-rewarding environment. This situation should not even require much legislation as long as the moral precepts are imbibed and cherished by the people. It appears that this is not what is happening. Therefore, government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and the legal-minded ones now insist that laws be strongly implemented, and they call more political

and administrative measures to intensify law enforcement among the erring constituents. But as Chester Hunt has warned: "when the mores are weak, laws do not work very well." It does not work in Yankelovich's America, neither would it work in the Philippines, let alone in Samar.

Common morality and social stability

The multiplicity of non-binding moral standards that come from the social trends of individualism, rationalism, scientism and teleology of progress (UNESCO, 1999: 26) in the recent times appear to be responsible for the breakdown of cultural and social stability. Cultural decline, writes Schaefer (1983: 83), results from people's rejection of shared values and the prevalence of rather non-obligatory opinions on basic questions of life. To address this condition, Popenoe (1995) asserts that, the concern for common morality becomes essential in society.

In dealing with this challenge in the global scale, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 1999: 26) appeals to all nations to identify and forge such ethical values and principles into a coherent and dynamic whole adequate to deal with the problems facing humanity. The teachings of the world's great religious heritage offer a vital force that can address the issue of cultural decline and social stability. Scriptural principles, such as the golden rule, not only offer moral standards for social behavior, but also provide spiritual guidance for the well-being of every individual (Baha'u'llah, 1990: 200; Hebrews, 4:12; 3 Kings, 2:4). Such is also the concept of authentic morality, which Hatcher (1998) refers to as the observance of humane relationships among people as, for instance, following Christ's commandment. That is to "love God with all thy heart and thy neighbor as thyself." (Luke, 10:27). Thus, the divine command may prove to be a better

teacher and disciplinarian than its human counterpart in society.

Adaptive and maladaptive culture

In progressive societies, the observance of authentic morality engenders a culture of altruism that transcends above the concerns of the individual and extends to the other members of the group. Such a society distinguishes itself not only through promotion of its cultural identity but also in its way of giving concern to and working for the well-being of others. People in these communities develop patterns of behaviour that are well adaptive to their social and physical environment. Such practices naturally provide better chances for their long-term survival. This kind of culture is considered adaptive. However, as C.P. Kottak (Kottak, 2000, p. 68) has said, if adaptive behaviour offers only short-term benefits to particular individuals this may harm the environment and threaten the group's life-long sustainability. Furthermore, in a society that is preoccupied by political and economic competition, its members often do not care what can improve the whole community or its environment rather than only the benefit that can be derived thereof by the competing groups. Thus, even the development and adoption of new and "beneficial" technology is resorted to by the opposing groups in order to accomplish their ends. In Maqueda Bay, many well-off and influential fishers engage in the use of destructive methods of fishing such as trawl and Danish seine and powerful lamps. Such new technologies enabled fishing expeditions a couple of decades ago to yield an average of 18 kgs comprising of a variety of species. Still using the same technology nowadays fishers can land only an average of three kg., a difference of 83%, and comprising of mostly pelagic "second-class" species. The situation becomes problematic considering the increase in population in the last three decades that

is now tipping-off the balance of resource demand and supply. It shows that the relentless utilization of such rather harmful techniques for several decades now has damaged the natural marine environment and endangers the stake on the resource of hundreds of thousands of Samar fisher folks.

Thus, modern technology and culture spawned through competition among political and economic groups creates a maladaptive culture. A maladaptive culture is one that threatens the group's chance for continued survival and reproduction.

Feigned nationalism: a damaged culture

The political and economic elite in Samar represent the callous ruling class who are apathetic to the plight of their environment. This group is mentally colonial, and xenocentric. Amongst the Filipino elite, according to Fallows (1987), reporting from an opinion survey of some Filipino respondents, revealed that "there is not necessarily a commitment by the upper class to making the Philippines successful as a nation". "If things get dicey, they're off, with their money," he further revealed. Fallows concluded that he learned "you are dealing here with a 'damaged culture'".

Angelita Resurreccion (2013) expressed a disagreement to Fallows' observation. Accordingly, the Fallows has an etic view of Philippine culture, which is easily branded as off tangent and tainted with American and western bias. It has lacking explanation on the phenomenon based on the standpoint of political, economic and historical background. It elaborated that the prevailing Philippine culture is largely a natural consequence of repressive and exploitative colonial rule by Spain and America. Having mentioned her involvement in a Christian fellowship

group in the country, Resurreccion felt that her group's project had found "expressions for our own "Community Revolution" by helping youths with their education to enable them to resist political, religious and economic forms of exploitation and injustices, and "to define what is best for their own cultures" (Resurreccion, 2013).

Indeed, a foreign view such as Fallows' is considered subjective and unjustified. As a sociological evaluation, it lacks the political, economic, and historical perspective. Fallows' assessment is understandably wanting of an insider's view—the emic perspective. Such an assessment trivializes the achievements and gloss over the political and historical achievements of Filipino nationalists who waged their blood and heroism in defence of the nation's honor, freedom, and sovereignty. But, since Fallows did not survey the Philippine countryside, he also did not observe how the Filipino people ravaged their woodlands, coral reefs, flora and fauna. And how the natives allowed their crooked elites to decide for their nation's future.

Resurreccion's way of thinking abides by anthropological sense of culture—the pluralistic and benign concept of cultural relativism, and decries Fallows' opinion as moralizing or blaming:

Even as Fallows lays the blame for Philippine underdevelopment at the feet of culture, he could have interrogated the way history and power relations in society intersect in people's everyday lives. So that, he might better understand Filipinos rather than resorting to moralizing or blaming.

As a collective entity, humanity ought to create a common future. Thus, Bernard and Spencer (1996) identified not only anthropological sense of culture, but also a humanistic sense. A "humanistic sense of culture is singular and evaluative",

and that "culture is what a person ought to acquire in order to become a fully worthwhile moral agent. When Fallows mentioned the customs and habits of Filipinos vis-à-vis that of other cultures, he was not comparing the natural and unique traits of such culture. He was rather assessing how people in different societies achieve their goals based on fairly human standards.

Resurreccion's Christian fellowship was a social life characterized by Christian and religious influences, and, therefore, reflected the religious concept propounded by Hatcher's theory of authentic morality (Hatcher, 1998). The Christian fellowship, thus, is an evidence of the authentic morality theory that speaks of the consensual pulling together of positive and altruistic goals among the followers of the tenets of Christ, and contributes to the betterment of many. Lacking this cohesive element in society, people become susceptible to individualistic and fragmentary relationships that lead to further conflict and disunity.

II. CONCLUSIONS

A pattern of behaviour that cultivates strong spirituality and altruism, minus the trappings of religious dogma and ritualism, is a type of an adaptive culture. Values and attitudes that seek to promote self-interest at the expense of others and the environment is a type of a maladaptive culture.

A damaged culture is, indeed, a maladaptive one, something that is blind to its goodness, its patrimony and posterity, its environment, and its future. It also lacks a genuine concern for others and the common weal. A damaged culture is the culture of the bigot Samareño elite.

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