

# Pagkalalake at Maka-Diyos: Understanding the Filipino family through the lenses of masculinity and religiosity<sup>1</sup>

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A dialogic study I conducted with Filipino men revealed that having a proper relationship with family is a key aspect of *maka-Diyos* (Fast 2019). It also revealed that men closely connect their masculinity with both family and with being *maka-Diyos*. These two aspects, *maka-Diyos* (Office of the President 1998, 1996; Department of Education 2013; Bautista 1989; Talisayon 1994; Bernardo and Ortigas 2000; Muyot 2003; Recto 2005; Clemente et al. 2008; Muega 2010; Bernardo, Clemente, and Liem 2014) and family, as “the most fundamental building block of relationships in Philippine society” (Torres 2015, 225), are key aspects of Filipino identity. In this paper, I will seek to understand Philippine masculinities’ close connection with both family and *maka-Diyos*. After defining masculinities and looking at how masculinity studies have developed in the Philippines, revealing a masculinity that is both diverse and well-defined, both informally and formally, I will draw some conclusions about how both masculinities and being *maka-Diyos* shape the Filipino family into what it is today.

### **Defining Masculinities**

Masculinity, in its most basic sense, is the “possession of the qualities traditionally associated with men” or “the approved way of being an adult male in any given society” (Gilmore 1990, 1). While these definitions may seem simple at first, a deeper look reveals a level of complexity that needs closer examination.

The first issue arises with the two phrases: “traditionally associated” and “approved way.” Note that both phrases are preceded by the definite article, implying there is only one way to be a man. But is that true? In reality, several different masculinities exist in any given society. We also need to ask who does the approving and who makes the associations referred to in these definitions.

The second issue arises with the phrase “in any given society.” This means that not only are there various masculinities within any given society but also that the number of masculinities increases when one crosses cultures. For example, when I was a child in Canada, the common practice was for the husband to take care of the family’s finances, whereas in the Philippines, the husband brings his salary home to his wife who is responsible for budgeting and spending.

Finally, when making definitions, we need to realize that there are often two levels of rules—one formal and the other non-formal (Recto 1985). Connell (2005) is a major contributor to the idea of the plural nature of masculinities. The model was developed in opposition to the concepts of static gender traits and gender roles. She also used the term “hegemonic” to indicate the form of masculinity that is the norm in the cultural psyche, even if this is not actually the normal masculinity when it comes to practice (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

The next section will examine Filipino popular culture to see if it contains evidence of various masculinities and, if so, how these masculinities are conceptualized on a popular level.

## Masculinities in Filipino Popular Culture

Filipinos have developed a complex understanding of masculinity that has connections with both family and religiosity. Filipinos love to make puns; and while humor is used to make people laugh, there is generally a hidden truth behind it (Maggay 2002). What is interesting is that majority of these puns define men based on their relationships with others, primarily with their wives (Angeles 2001, 10, 11), thus painting a picture of both masculinities and family.

Some of these terms, such as *padre de pamilya* (father/head of the family) and *haligi ng tahanan* (pillar of the home) refer to the key strengthening roles that men play in the home. While men may provide the strength within the home, the mother, as *ilaw ng tahanan* (light of the home), provides the spiritual direction. This implies an inherent spiritual role that mothers play that is not considered part of the father's role. The assertion of the "Manifesto of a Real Man" that "a real man doesn't go to church" supports this by seemingly removing men from the equation when it comes to religiosity (Xyxo Loco 2009). It errs in assuming that the terms church and *maka-Diyos* are describing the same thing.

Other terms depict the struggle for power within family relationships: *Ander de saya* (under the skirt) describes a henpecked husband. *Kumander* is a common term used by husbands to describe their wives. For example, when asked if he would like to do something, a man will often reply, "I need to get the commander's permission first." *Machu-machunurin* is a play on words based on "*macho*" (masculine in an overly assertive or aggressive way) and "*masunurin*" (obedient). The pun lies in the fact that *machunurin* sounds like *masunurin*. Rubio and Green (2011) rightly see these puns as evidence of the greater-than-equal status of women in Philippine cultures.

Others connect masculinity to the ability to perform various tasks or act in certain ways. When performing certain tasks, particularly where strength is required, men will often be told, "Your masculinity depends upon this." Sobritchea recalls that her mother would ask her sons, "Don't you have any balls?" when they acted afraid.<sup>3</sup> On other occasions, I have

heard mothers telling their crying sons, “Stop. Men don’t cry.” This provides some evidence that mothers share the responsibility of constructing the masculinity of their children.

“For the boys” is an English phrase sometimes used when a man requests a tip with the underlying assumption that this tip will fund men’s vices. On one hand, it illustrates the indirect nature of communication that Filipinos engage in. On the other hand, the fact that this phrase is exclusively from the lips of men—women do not use a similar phrase—and that they could simply ask for a tip, shows that this phrase is a significant indicator of understanding masculinity. It combines a request for accepting men as they are with an understanding that sometimes men act immaturely.

Popular understandings of masculinity appear to support the idea that there is one accepted way of being a man and that both men and women have distinct roles they need to fulfill within the family. However, we also see a multifaceted masculinity that is sometimes a pillar and sometimes submissive and obedient.

### **Formal Masculinity Studies in the Philippines**

Formal masculinity studies share the multifaceted understanding of masculinities that we see in popular conceptualizations. One of the first studies of masculinities in the Philippines was Santiago (1977), who studied men in a village in the province of Bulacan. Santiago identifies three ideal measurements of masculinity: manly man, real man, and good person.<sup>4</sup> *Manly man* identifies those few who achieve the characteristics of masculinity, *real man* identifies those few men who achieve the ability to do the things men do, and *good person* identifies those few men who achieve goodness as humans (168). Santiago further divides the measurement of masculinity into four areas, namely, things that must happen, things that happen, things that should not happen but still do, and things that used to happen but do not anymore (169). This suggests a masculinity that is undergoing change and is impacted by changing values in society.

Further, Santiago also identifies three categories of masculinity: having male characteristics; having the ability to perform the roles that either fellow men or the society expects of them; and engaging in sexual activities and behaviour (168).

Note that while Santiago's study reveals a complexity to masculinity, it does not delve into the area of religiosity or spirituality. Does that mean that she does not view religiosity as a key marker of masculinity? What is clear is that masculinity is not merely a set of roles or responsibilities that one fulfills, nor is it achieving a certain level. Masculinity is complex and multifaceted.

While Santiago looked at men in general, Tan (1994) focuses on one of the key aspects of family creation, namely, fathers, who he identifies as procreators, dilettantes, determinative, and generative. Procreators neither enjoy nor spend much time at fathering because their understanding is primarily biological. Tan identifies this with the Philippine understanding that all children have a debt of honor to their parents merely "for having given them life" (34). Thus, the procreator sees himself as a provider for his children, who are mere progeny, and this gives him a feeling of immortality. The dilettante, while having a positive fatherhood experience, is not very "active" as a father. Tan identifies Overseas Filipino Workers as fitting into this "supporting role to that of the main caretaker, usually the mother" (30). He is a friend to his child who is like a pet, and this gives him a feeling of companionship. Neither the procreator nor the dilettante feels that fatherhood in any way contributes to their personal identity. Determinative fathers see fatherhood as "a task, an obligation, a responsibility to bear, perhaps even a mission" (29). The objective for them is to get their child to a certain goal—educational, career-wise, or athletic—but they do not necessarily enjoy the task of fatherhood. For them, his child is a project and molding them gives him a feeling of accomplishment. Since their approach to fatherhood is largely dependent upon how well their child performs, their own identity will be affected in either a positive or a negative way. Finally, generative fathers are both involved in their children's lives and enjoy the

role of fatherhood. He is a guardian for his child who is in his charge, and this gives him a feeling of personal fulfillment. This will allow the father repeated opportunities to reflect on his own values as he journeys alongside his child through life. Once again, we see the complexities associated with Filipino fatherhood.

Additionally, Gregorio observes that family critique attempts to shape a young man's masculinity. These young men are often misunderstood as lazy when in fact they work quite hard. In the end, however, "gaining respect of older generation in terms of work is important for young men" (Gregorio 2022).

Pingol (2001), in a series of 50 interviews in Ilocos in 1997, develops a Filipino notion of male identity, which she categorizes as "Prominent," "Ideal," "Other," and "Lesser extent." Among the responses, Prominent referred to the "ability to provide for the family" and "success in the workplace." The Ideal responses included "being a good leader with intelligence and expertise, being principled, being helpful, being decent, being law-abiding, being trustworthy, and being understanding." The "Other" responses consisted of "virility, physical strength, and good looks; while the "Lesser extent" response was "the capacity to take risks, as in gambling or illicit affairs, and yet remain responsible to one's family" (Pingol 2001, 3).

Pingol then discusses two sub-aspects of Ilocano masculinity, *kinalalaki* and *malalaki*. Each aspect is seen as a culturally legitimate way of gaining masculine power in the society but *kinalalaki* does this by using the "ideal typical traits of the responsible husband," while the *malalaki* does the same through "the machismo of rogues and daredevils or *malalaki*" (Pingol 2001, 4).<sup>5</sup>

Neither Santiago, Tan, Pingol, nor Gregorio touch on areas connected to *maka-Diyos*. However, de Castro (1995), while he begins by following the common gender discussion of distinguishing between sex (physically male) and gender (socially constructed), he also moves into the ethical aspect of

the gender debate. According to de Castro, “masculinity ... has no ethical aspects. It has no necessary implications for what should or shouldn’t be; nothing is right or wrong” (141; my translation). Thus, masculinity can be expressed in any form without the danger of being declared “wrong.” In answer to this, de Castro proposes introducing the term *pagkamaginoo* (gallantry) to achieve the ethics that are missing from the other terms. Ethics seems to mean proper interpersonal relationships between people, regardless of their gender: “this is demonstrated by both parents working, they both patiently take care of their children, they both care for their interests and show stability during times of emergency or disaster” (141; my translation). On that basis, de Castro’s move into the realm of ethics critiques popular masculinity ideas. A person is not a man merely because one fits into society’s understanding of what a man is. Rather they are men because they choose to have *pagkamaginoo*. Thus, a mere statement of “for the boys,” for example, is insufficient for defining masculinity.

These studies make it clear that masculinity in the Philippines is not monolithic but incorporates a variety of factors including ethics, morals, and practices, which fits into Connell’s hegemonic masculinity framework. They also clarify that masculinity is not formed in a vacuum but is instead shaped by interaction with others, most particularly with family members. The quality of a man’s interactions with others directly results in identifying his brand of masculinity as desirable or not.

### **Filipino Male Spirituality**

The *haligi-ilaw* framework above implies that mothers fill a key role in the religious development of the Filipino family. Coupled with universal ideas that women are more religious than men (Beit-Hallahmi 2003), this raises the question of the place spirituality has in masculinity. While some studies have been conducted on Filipino masculinity, very few, if any, have been conducted on the connection between masculinity and spirituality.

Filipino male spirituality plays a rather small role in Pingol's study. I was surprised to initially find a rather negative tone to her comments. At one point, after describing how she had to politely decline the religious advances of three "evangelists," she commented, "I had to make them feel that their religious mission was as valid as that of others" (Pingol 2001, 23). Her conclusion, however, points to the help that some of her informants, both male and female, received from their religious beliefs as they sought to reshape their masculine identity. She does note, however, "[t]urning to the Bible is not something men in the locality automatically do in times of crisis" (252). However, there is some evidence of husbands following a moral code that helps them cope with the departure of their wives. The men interviewed showed varying abilities to cope with these changes. In her discussion on the changes in the sexual dynamics of the relationship, Pingol refers to a "masculine code" that some of the men chose to keep ensured that the marriage bed would be kept pure (228). She connects this "code" with the concept of *kinalalaki* (105). This distinction between two categories of masculinity, however, while not pointing directly to spirituality, at least hints at a kind of morality that makes behaving properly worthwhile.

Rubio and Green (2011) also developed a psychological instrument called the Filipino Adherence to Masculinity Expectations scale. Based on a study of students at St. Louis University in Baguio City, their instrument "takes into account indigenous and non-Western conceptions of masculinity in the Philippines" (78). To this end, they identified seven "Filipino masculine dimensions," namely, Responsibility; Family Orientedness; Respectful Deference to Spouse, Women, and the Elderly; Integrity; Intelligence and Academic Achievement; Strength; and a Sense of Community (82). Once again, no component of this masculinity framework included *maka-Diyos*.

A 2019 study I did attempted to close the gap between the concepts of masculinity and *maka-Diyos* (Fast 2019). Men see family as central to this since their clearly defined concept of *maka-Diyos* includes proper treatment of family, neighbor, and God. Men also have a clearly defined concept of masculinity, but what we notice is that this is not universal, but context-



specific. The men are aware of the larger discourse surrounding masculinity, including topics such as gender relations and negative perceptions of men in society, and they were eager to offer a counter-discourse by telling stories of how they help their wives around the house and even submit to them on occasion, how they have changed from their previously violent ways, how they have eschewed the womanizing lifestyles that they may have previously led, and how they have embraced their emotional sides. We also see how they embrace the positive attitudes of obligation, responsibility, and foundational beliefs, and view their families as central. As I discussed in the said study:

Men see themselves primarily as *tao*, or human beings with limits and problems ... as *lalake*, sharing both traditional and non-traditional viewpoints on who men are. Issues such as violence and womanizing were covered, in addition to how men think, how a real man is defined and not defined, and how they act. Men embody popular proverbs that describe men ... understand what it means to be a man, with all the attendant obligations and responsibilities ... [and] view their relationships with women ... [have a] close identification of men and temptation, and ... the mutual impact of men on family and family on men. (Fast 2019, 282)

### **Concluding Remarks on Masculinities and Family**

While much of what we have discussed is not specifically addressed to the family, in that it addresses men as men, understanding masculinity raises the question of how these masculinities inform and impact the Filipino family. Others have taken up the challenge to define what family means in the Philippines; so for this paper, we will look at the role of the family in a man's life, relationships between spouses, relationships between parents and their children, and extended family relationships beyond immediate parents and siblings.<sup>6</sup> We will also touch on how culture-bearers within the family help shape a cultural view of masculinity at an early age.

### *Role of the family in a man's life*

Family is important in helping shape men's epistemology (Fast 2023). It is one of the key epistemes that men use when determining both their being *maka-Diyos* as well as how they formulate their masculinities. Men see the relationships they have within the family as important—so much so that they are willing to change their minds so that other family members' desires can be accommodated, including discussing how their expressions of religiosity are decided as a family rather than by the father alone.

### *Relationship between spouses*

The *haligi-ilaw* dichotomy in popular Filipino culture implies that, even though men may have an awareness of *maka-Diyos*, it is really their wives who guide the spiritual aspects of the family. These popular sayings may also be an indicator of women's greater-than-equal status in Philippine society. Women also serve as culture bearers and help shape masculinities. This partnership between mothers and fathers is reinforced by Tan's study that focuses exclusively on fathers.

### *The role of the man in the family*

While some men see fatherhood as a mere biological fact with no attached responsibility, others see themselves as part of the parenting team, essential in the future of their children. They have dual responsibilities of giving their children a good future and concentrating on teaching them what Jesus taught. They also see the role of the man as one of support for the family, whether for individual members or the whole family. Support means helping meet their needs. Furthermore, the man is to bring joy to his family. Tan's excellent study of fathers introduces the idea of fatherhoods. How a man chooses to understand and respond to his role will affect both his identity as well as the identity of his children.

### *The role of the family in constructing masculinities*

People are shaped by their family environments, meaning that a man's development begins at birth and is the responsibility of the parents. Having a family brings changes to a man's individual freedom. When he is unmarried, he can do whatever he wants or go wherever he wants. Once he is married, he needs to consider the needs of his family first. He now has a new role, that of support for his family. The family helps the man reprioritize his time and his health. Partly, this is due to how a family brings changes in a man's attitudes toward vices such as drinking and smoking. These changes are also beneficial to the family as a whole because the money he saves can be used for his family's needs. As one man pointed out, there is a competition between his family and his vices and now he wants his family to win.

Masculinity and family in the Philippine context are closely tied together, and both are connected to one of the Filipino core values of *maka-Diyos*. This results in masculinities that value the role of the family, relationships between spouses, between parents and their children, and among extended family relationships in a man's life. There is room for further studies in this field that would include the other key Filipino values of *makatao*, *makakalikasan*, and *makabansa* and how men both shape and are shaped by them. Further studies can also explore functional fatherhood or motherhood, as performed by the spouses left in the Philippines by Overseas Filipino Workers.

## About the Author

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Portions of this paper are adapted from my 2019 dissertation entitled “Pagkalalake at maka-Diyos: A dialogic look at masculinity and religiosity among Filipino males” (Ph.D. diss., University of the Philippines, Diliman, 2019). A version of this paper was previously published in a series of blogposts on my website at

Fast, Michael J. 2022. “What does it mean to be a man, part 2? Masculinities in the Philippines.” *Michael J. Fast: conversations on church, culture, masculinities, & mission*. 14 March. <https://michaeljfast.com/2022/03/14/what-does-it-mean-to-be-a-man-part-2-masculinities-in-the-philippines/>.

<sup>2</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, 3rd ed. (2000), s.v. “masculinity.”

<sup>3</sup> Carolyn I. Sobritchea, personal communication, 16 September 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Aquiling-Dalisay, Nepomuceno-Van Heugten, and Sto. Domingo’s (1995) three categories of Filipino males, namely manhood (*pagkalalaki*), real man (*tunay na lalaki*), and fulfilled man (*ganap na lalaki*), are similar.

<sup>5</sup> There seems to be no equivalent Tagalog gloss for the two Ilocano words. Perhaps, the closest might be *pagkamaginoo* and *macho*.

- <sup>6</sup> “Extended family” as a descriptor is not as relevant in the Philippines as it might be in individualistic societies because family in the Philippines naturally includes those beyond parents and siblings. But for lack of a better word, we will use it here.

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