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## Balibbayan Boxes as Ideography: Reclaiming *Kapwa* from an Authoritarian Reign

### **Introduction**

In a world filled with conflicting ideologies, symbolic ideographs sometimes experience a fluid and dynamic evolution of meaning and/or purpose within new contexts or shifting sociopolitical landscapes. The American flag, for example, once seen as emblematic of freedom (Hart, 1924), can be interpreted in modern times as a symbol of systemic oppression (Lucas, Linsenmeyer, & Finocchiaro, 2017). Similarly, Friedlander (1992) describes the origin of the caduceus symbol as the magic wand of Hermes in Greek mythology before detailing the journey to its modern usage as a symbol of medicine. For Filipinos, the practice of sending balikbayan boxes began as an invention of a violent and oppressive dictator (Blanc, 1996), but I assert that the tradition stands today as a symbolic embodiment of pre-colonial *kapwa* ideology.

The Filipino concept of *kapwa* – an inherent and reciprocal union of the self and the other – existed at the core of indigenous culture long before the tradition of sending balikbayan boxes began in 1973 (Mendoza & Perkinson, 2003). This practice originated as part of Ferdinand Marcos' Balikbayan Program and was a creative innovation from “a master politician and manipulator of symbolic meaning” (Blanc, 1996). Used as a political tool in the dictator's effort to solve the 1970's economic crisis in the Philippines (Tardiff, 2021), I contend that the program capitalized upon the cultural value of *kapwa* to sway Filipinos into participating. In modern times, despite the Balikbayan Program's political beginnings under an authoritarian dictatorship

rooted in factionalism and individualism (Alonzo, 2022; Flor, 1995), the tradition of sending balikbayan boxes has become a staple across the Filipino diaspora, an act of community care working to strengthen and rebuild ties between loved ones living sociocultural worlds apart (Albuero, 2005).

In this paper, I will utilize ideology theory to assert that the practice of sending balikbayan boxes was initiated and proliferated via clever wielding of the ideological virtue of *kapwa* by former President-turned-Dictator Ferdinand Marcos. Additionally, I argue that the tradition currently plays a newer, secondary role as an ideographic symbol of indigenous *kapwa* culture thriving in defiance of his attempt to utilize it for political gain. I will begin by defining the theory of ideology, applying it to the Filipino value of *kapwa* before discussing the inception of the Balikbayan Program by President Marcos under martial law, highlighting his manipulation of *kapwa* as a core Filipino value to further the goals of his dictatorship. Afterward, I will delve into the prolific and lasting tradition of sending balikbayan boxes as an ideographic symbol of the reclamation and restoration of *kapwa* from the ashes of a fascist, individualistic administration long ago exiled from the Philippine Islands.

### **Literature Review**

The theory of ideology is the study of the impact of ideographs on the human psyche as well as the communal behavioral effects and consequential social results of pointed usage of said symbols (Balkin, 1998). Ideology itself is defined as a set of values or beliefs shared among a social collective or utilized within political or economic systems (American Heritage Dictionary), while ideographs are considered a vocabulary of concepts and ideals used as “guides, warrants, reasons, or excuses for behavior and belief” (McGee, 1980). McGee suggests that ideology is used as a political language with the ability to sway minds and control the beliefs

and behavior of citizens, theorizing that ideographs play dual roles: concurrently expressing their original intended meanings while possessing the potential to alter their symbolic significance within new contexts. Balkin also speaks on the duality of ideology, contending that traditional thinking views ideology as a powerful method capable of distorting reality to push people into acting against their own interests, while a more modern conception of ideology also emphasizes the ability of human minds to shape their own collective social reality out of their ideals (1998). Thus, the theory of ideology is employed as a method for exploring the gap between social or symbolic reality and actual reality (McGee, 1980) by studying the effects of the political or social usage of concepts, ideas, and the symbols that represent them.

Ideology theory is used to uncover the ways that terms and symbols for ideas and concepts can morph in meaning or are able to signify multiple ideas within varying contexts (Foner, 1994; Onuf, 2012). This theory is also implemented to follow the trajectory of ideological phrases through their evolution from the literal to the purposefully weighted metaphorical (Billig & MacMillan, 2005). In indigenous studies, some scholars utilize ideology theory to highlight the dichotomy of post-colonial ideologies, emphasizing their power to legitimize social inequality and uphold systematic disadvantages against indigenous peoples on colonized land (Sibley & Osborne, 2016). Thus, applied sociologically, this theory has repeatedly proven not only the inherent power of words and symbols over the fabric of social reality, but also the deep centrality of ideologies within both political movements and the culture of the social groups from which they originated.

### **Context: *Kapwa* and *Balikbayan* Boxes**

*Kapwa*, a Tagalog word for the indigenous Filipino concept of interconnectedness between the self and the other (Mendoza & Perkinson, 2003), is the core value of Filipino culture

and psychology (David, Sharma, & Petalio, 2017; Desai, 2016). Considering others an integral part of the self is so immensely important, it is regarded as a necessary step to becoming one's fully authentic self (“‘Kapwa,’ ‘hiya,’ and the search for Filipino identity,” 2024; Mendoza & Perkinson, 2003). With deep roots in pre-colonial life on the Philippine archipelago, the virtue of *kapwa* perseveres today as a foundational aspect of collectivistic Filipino culture in defiance of the colonization of the Filipino people by nationalists imposing their own individualistic cultures and, more recently, the reign of a dangerously authoritarian dictator (David, Sharma, & Petalio, 2017; “Kapwa: The Filipino Concept of Shared Identity,” 2024).

In modern times, *kapwa* is visible around the world in large part due to the sheer volume of migrant Filipino workers across the globe as well as the fields of work many choose to pursue in their host countries. According to the Philippine Statistics Authority, over two million Filipino citizens were living and working abroad in 2023 (2024), while National Geographic places the total number of Filipinos working overseas at ten million, or roughly one tenth of the population of the Philippine Islands (Almendral, n.d.). Filipina workers in particular often find employment within fields such as nursing, childcare, and domestic care (Rodriguez, 2008). Worldwide, the Republic of the Philippines is the single largest source of migrant nurses, with 17,000 signing overseas contracts in 2019 alone (Brush & Vasupuram, 2006; Robredo, Ong, Eala, & Naguit, 2022). The virtue of community care inherent in the idea of *kapwa* is apparent in the actions of Filipinos who choose to spend their lives caring for the communities that welcome them.

A major part of the Filipino cultural concept of community care is the act of feeding or offering food to others. A common greeting of welcome upon arrival to many Filipino households throughout the diaspora is, “Have you eaten?” (Reyes & Catindig, 2024). As Pineda writes, “In Filipino culture, food isn’t merely sustenance; it’s a symbol of love, care, and togetherness,” embodying the hospitality and warmth intrinsic to Filipino *kapwa* culture (2024).

With migration affecting roughly 70% of Filipino families (Pineda, 2024), balikbayan boxes – large packages filled to the brim with non-perishable food, daily use items, and tokens of affection – act as connectors to and reminders of the love and comfort of family and community abroad (Albuero, 2005).

Originating as part of Ferdinand Marcos' Balikbayan Program in 1973, balikbayan boxes were introduced into Filipino culture as one of several program policies instituted under martial law as a means of bolstering the country's economy by encouraging migrant Filipinos – or *balikbayan* – to return for homeland visits or send balikbayan boxes in their stead (Blanc, 1996; Tardiff, 2021). The term *balikbayan* itself is a Marcos invention, a combination of two Tagalog words: *balik*, meaning “to return,” and *bayan*, originally signifying “village” but later evolving to mean “nation” (Albuero, 2005). The Marcos administration's program was wildly successful, quickly becoming “the most important source of foreign exchange, skills and income for the Philippines” (Blanc, 1996). By appealing to the core value of *kapwa* in Filipino culture by instituting a state-sponsored system for sharing community love from a distance, the dictator created a lasting tradition for long distance Filipino communities which still serves its original financial purpose today, contributing millions to billions of dollars toward the Philippine economy (Blanc, 1996; Tolentino, 2006).

### **Argument/Application**

I assert that *kapwa* is an ideological virtue native to pre-colonial, pre-nationalistic Filipino culture employed by the Marcos administration as incentive for Filipinos to participate in the Balikbayan Program. Furthermore, I argue that the continuation of the practice of sending balikbayan boxes stands now as a true symbol of *kapwa* in opposition of its roots as a tool for social control by an authoritarian regime.

As an ideological virtue, the indigenous idea of *kapwa* as the other-within-the-self and self-within-the-other is intrinsically collectivistic and deeply Filipino. The ideology of *kapwa* can be interpreted as community, unity, and collective identity. However, the concept of *kapwa* can also easily be wielded as a tool to produce feelings of guilt, obligation, or shame due to the nature of the virtue that it signifies: that for a person to be fully authentic, they must always hold consideration for others. Care for oneself, from this viewpoint, cannot exist without care for the other. Therefore, in Filipino culture, not caring for other community members translates to not being authentic or aligned within the *kapwa* collective or oneself.

As the son of a man who was executed by Filipino guerilla soldiers for his work as a propagandist for Japan during World War II (Sharkey, 1986), Ferdinand Marcos was quite literally born into the world of propaganda. Considering his family and personal origins in Ilocos Norte, a province located on the largest of the Philippine Islands, he was also born into the world of Filipino culture, community, and values. With the establishment of his Balikbayan Program, Marcos skillfully employed his deep knowledge of both symbolic propaganda and Filipino culture and psyche – of which *kapwa* lies at the core – to influence the Filipino people into participation. Moved by societal and cultural pressure, any Filipinos choosing not to engage in the sending of balikbayan boxes would face the risk of negative judgment and alienation from their communities for appearing not to be aligned authentically with Filipino communal culture or themselves. Conversely, those willing and able to participate would reap the social benefits of their observable acts of seemingly undeniable, authentic generosity in addition to the financial breaks offered by the Balikbayan Program (Blanc, 1996). Thus, I argue that the ideology of *kapwa* was a tool for Marcos' own personal and political gain, with the upswing in the failing Philippine economy serving to temporarily legitimize his recently assumed dictatorship. While the dictator's win would be short-lived, balikbayan boxes and the Balikbayan Program would

quickly become permanent fixtures within Filipino culture themselves, with the duty- and tax-free privileges of the program signed into law by Marcos' successor the year after his deposition (Executive Order No. 206).

The Balikbayan Program continues to succeed today with the exchange of balikbayan boxes estimated to have become a multimillion- or even billion-dollar industry (Blanc, 1996; Shyong, 2018) with approximately 400,000 boxes shipped each month (Asis, 2018). The nonstop flow of gifts and sustenance to and from loved ones living hundreds or thousands of miles apart is now as deeply ingrained in Filipino culture as the *kapwa* it so tactilely and visibly embodies. Therefore, I assert that the act of sending balikbayan boxes has become an ideographic representation of the reclamation of collectivistic *kapwa* culture, flying in the face of its origin as a tool wielded for the benefit of the individualistic, authoritarian dictatorship it has far outlived.

### **Conclusion**

Long before the arrival of the colonizers, before the seven thousand islands in the Philippine archipelago were united under one flag, before those indigenous lands and their inhabitants came to be called by the name of a then-future, now-past king from another realm, *kapwa* existed in the hearts and minds of the Filipino people. Passed from generation to generation, barriers such as distance, language gaps, political powers, and their wars have stood no chance attempting to stop or even dilute this core, indigenous, collectivist value still thriving within Filipino culture throughout the diaspora. Ferdinand Marcos was no exception, although as a master manipulator well versed in the twisting of symbolic meaning, he was able to use the ideology of *kapwa* to temporarily extend his authoritarian reign. Appealing to the deep communal love between the Filipino people – the *kapwa* need for the other and the self to coexist as one – the balikbayan boxes were an instant success (Blanc, 1996). Their staying power,

however, stands as proof of the strength of indigenous Filipino values, long outlasting the individualistic regime that spawned them. Applying the theory of ideology to this act of communal love and care, I contend that while the tradition originated as a product of the propagandization of the idea of *kapwa* by the Marcos administration, it continues today as an ideographic expression of true *kapwa* in action.

In conclusion, when studying the cultural trajectory of colonized indigenous communities, the use of ideology theory is imperative for deciphering the meaning of and intentionality behind the usage of ideographs as well as the ways ideologies can shape the modern world while remaining a connection to worlds of the past. By studying the origins, political utilization, and modern interpretations of the *kapwa* ideology, it is possible to trace the flow of influence this core Filipino value has had throughout time over the people who have attempted to live by it. Therefore, I call for the continuation of the use of ideology theory as a necessary lens through which to witness and uncover both the past and present of sociocultural groups, the ways ideologies can be used against the cultures from which they originate, and the utilization and symbolic transformation of these ideologies as a reflection of or reaction to the evolution of the cultures themselves.

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