

Religion and the “Blessing” of American Citizenship: Political and Civic Implications for Post-1965 Filipino Immigrants

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This study investigates how Filipino-Americans perceive, interpret, and construct civiness, or the ways they embody immigrant, post-colonial experiences. It demonstrates how specific histories and contexts of reception, like colonialism, strongly intertwine with religion in shaping notions of American citizenship, as the U.S. formally colonized the Philippines during the early twentieth century. Filipino-Americans, largely Catholic, feel a sense of *utang ng loob*, or indebtedness, for the “blessing” of American citizenship. High civic engagement ensues as Filipino-Americans seek to fulfill their “debt” and prove their worth by contributing to the development of their new nation-state. Although highly civically engaged, Filipino-Americans limit overt, domestic political participation due to *utang ng loob*. Paradoxically, Filipino-Americans attempt to transnationally increase their political power and civic presence in the Philippines because they feel obligated to help Filipinos “who did not receive the blessing of American citizenship.” Overall, this study advances analysis towards a more complex model on immigration, integration, and the role that religion plays in this respective process.

In this article I explore the role of indebtedness in Filipino-American culture. From May–August 2011, I conducted 60 in-depth interviews and attended numerous events in Virginia, the 9th largest Filipino-populated

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state; specifically, Virginia Beach, which houses the highest concentration of Filipino residents on the East Coast (U.S. Census 2000). I investigated one civic organization, Filipino-American Community Action Group (Fil-Am CAG), the only politically engaged Filipino group in the area, and one religious body, St. Gregory Catholic Church, the largest Filipino Catholic parish in Virginia Beach, in order to explore how religion matters to immigrants.

Throughout my 60 interviews I found that Filipino-American respondents feel a sense of *utang ng loob*, or indebtedness, to the U.S. for their American citizenship and largely believe that their faith in God brought them to the U.S., or played some role in their gaining U.S. citizenship. Put short, U.S. citizenship fosters indebtedness. Notions of indebtedness mean that not only were the Filipino-Americans in my study grateful for their U.S. citizenship, but feel that they have to repay this debt or “do something” in return for the blessing of American citizenship. Indebtedness is bound up by God—Filipino-Americans couch indebtedness in religious terms that connote metaphysical forces, often describing their U.S. citizenship as “fate” or “a blessing” from God. I argue that indebtedness becomes a lens through which Filipino-Americans perceive and interpret their understandings of citizenship, and thus shapes how and the degree to which they navigate their respective religious and civic institutions.

The concept of cultural indebtedness: *Utang ng loob*

Across the scholarly literature, research on indebtedness remains largely undeveloped, though *utang ng loob* has been mentioned in other scholarly works on Filipino-Americans as a specific cultural value that they often possess (Gonzalez 2009; Root 1998). For instance, *utang ng loob* has been described as “debt of gratitude” and a “well-recognized Filipino value,” among other traits (Gonzalez 2009). Other scholars have described *utang ng loob* similarly, as an “internal debt of gratitude” that “has its roots in mutual support and interdependence that contains the element of reciprocity: If I do you a favor, you will owe me one in return. These terms may mean different things depending on the situation” (Berganio, Tacata Jr., and Jamero, 1997). Alternately, some scholars have suggested that Filipino cultural values like *utang ng loob* reinforce the inferior position of Filipinos in the U.S. (Lott 1980; Revilla 1997).

On a sociological level, *utang ng loob* is more recently explored in relation to social capital. Drawing from Putnam and Tocqueville, Joaquin Gonzalez, broadly asserts that it allows “Filipino migrants to connect to

mainstream U.S. society in both ‘bridging Filipinization’ and ‘bonding Filipinization.’ The church is not just a site that they Filipinize in bonding terms but a space they use to bridge themselves to Filipinize U.S. society” (Gonzalez 2009, 272). My paper thus provides social scientific context for “bridging Filipinization” and “bonding Filipinization” social capital by showing *why* Hampton Roads¹ Filipino immigrants connect to the U.S. mainstream, as will be discussed below in the paper.

Psychologists who explore Filipino-Americans have also taken an interest in *utang ng loob*, for example, observing that “Filipinos are always generous with each other” (Nadal, 2011). Leading Filipino-American psychologist, Kevin Nadal, describes *utang ng loob* as a “debt of reciprocity” which may lead to “more psychological distress” because Filipinos are expected to “conform, comply, or obey because they expect that others will return the favor or because they want to be socially accepted by others” (Nadal 2011). Subsequently, a Filipino may “isolate himself [or herself] altogether and continue to feel culturally conflicted” if they delay repayment (Nadal 2011). In this case, “debt of reciprocity” is conceptualized more on the micro-social level, where Filipinos are expected to place their families first and children should feel indebted to their parents for the sacrifices they made for their success (Nadal 2011). This finding suggests

that familial bonds may be strained due to “debt of reciprocity.” Relatively little has been done, though, to explore the role of indebtedness in Filipino culture at the macro-level. This paper broadly attempts to advance *utang ng loob* from an interdisciplinary, social-scientific approach.

Cultural indebtedness, religion, and civic engagement in immigrant communities

Scholars have studied immigrants and ethnic minorities in the broad areas of civic engagement, volunteerism, and citizenship, as well as how religion intersects with these sociological phenomena. Broadly speaking, current research indicates sharp differences in civic participation rates between racial and ethnic groups (Verba, Scholzman and Brady 1995; Lien 2001; Stoll 2001). Most of this work has focused on the active role played by churches in helping immigrants politically participate in the U.S. through gaining citizenship and voting. Ethnic religious communities like the Korean Christian Church have been observed to contribute to these pro-citizenship processes by providing political resources to aid immigrants in

1. Hampton Roads refers to a constellation of cities on Virginia’s eastern seaboard including Virginia Beach.

navigating the citizenship application process, overcoming language barriers, or facilitating the attainment of U.S. citizenship (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000b; Lien 2004). Asian Catholic immigrants who reside in the five largest immigrant-populated areas in the U.S. have obtained the highest rate of citizenship among American immigrant communities (Lien 2004). Catholic and Evangelical churches have played a major role in the lives of Salvadorian immigrants (Menjivar 2000, 40). Salvadorian immigrants have received a wide range of resources from financial support, spiritual comfort, and a sense of community to social infrastructures that help them cope with personal and community-level problems (Menjivar 2000, 42).

These findings, however, are not universally and consistently true across religion and race. Civic participation also largely depends on the social resources that churches offer to immigrants and illustrates the highly complex role that religion plays in immigrants' lives:

Immigrants "assimilate" only to the milieu that their resources—what they bring with them and what they encounter—allow them to and not all do so at the same rate. Thus, whereas different churches may guide immigrants along different paths, the end result remains conditioned by the structure of opportunities available to the particular immigrant group in the context and time they arrive. (Menjivar 2003, 43)

In other words, religion may not necessarily facilitate full immigrant incorporation, or citizenship, as in the case of Asian Catholic immigrants. The 2000 National Council of Catholic Bishops/U.S. Catholic Conference found that despite high levels of Latino Catholicism, Catholic Churches generally failed to expose Latinos to and help them develop "skill-learning opportunities" (e.g., political skills), as compared to Latino Protestants (Levitt, 2002, 156). This shortcoming may partly explain why many Latinos have not become U.S. citizens, which subsequently negatively impacts their ability to civically engage in society (Levitt 2002, 155).

Research has typically demonstrated that religious communities socialize first and second generation immigrants into American politics (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000; Menjivar 2002b; Yang 1999; Carnes and Yang 2004; Freston 2004; Menjivar 2003; Wellmeier 1998). Specifically, Asian Americans who are more religious are more likely to vote (Lien 2004). This impact of religion on the civic behavior of Asian Americans is especially significant in light of the fact that over 40% of immigration between 1990 and 1999 was comprised of Asians coming to the U.S. (Lien 2004).

Many scholars argue that religious involvement helps people to civically participate in their ethnic communities in the U.S. (Klineberg 2004; Yang

1999b). Asian Indian Hindus in the Dallas-Fort Worth (DFW) metroplex, for example, have noted that their involvement in the DFW Hindu Temple played a role in community-building that helped bridge differences in Indian identity and subsequently fostered pan-Indian Hindu identity (Brettell 2005, 860). Specifically, through the construction process of building the DFW Hindu temple, members of the Indian community came together to “bridge the differences across the Indian subcontinent based on regionally-based Hindu traditions” (Brettell 2005, 861). Therefore, the religious lives and civic participation of Asian Indian Hindus not only physically fostered the construction of the DFW temple, but also forged a “common Hindu identity that transcends the regional religious diversity brought from India.” (Brettell 2005, 864).

Religious communities encourage this civic engagement because they provide motives for volunteering and connections to local forms of both secular and religious community service (Wuthnow 1999). Taiwanese Buddhist immigrants from the Dharma Light Temple in Southern California, for instance, have been found to be more publically engaged than Taiwanese Christians (Chen 2005). Specifically, Taiwanese Buddhists have explicitly stated that they “want to be more involved in society,” which directly corresponds to Dharma Lights’ objective “to benefit society through charitable programs” (Chen 2005, 14). Specifically, Taiwanese Buddhists from this religious community have civically engaged in a range of activities from organizing disaster relief, charitable fundraising, and gang intervention to local prison ministry (Chen 2005, 14). This highly civically engaged community is particularly interested in connecting with others outside their ethnic and religious group because of its concern for interreligious cooperation and dialogue (Chen 2005, 17). Overall, membership in a religious organization may provide political information, motivation, and a space for members to build their communication and organizing skills (Stoll and Wong 2007). In respect to motivation, those who are active in religious organizations are more likely to be active in associational and voluntary activities (Smidt 1999). This finding is consistent across racial and ethnic groups (Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995; Harris 1999; Jones-Correa and Leal 2001). Findings from the 1992–1994 Los Angeles Survey of Urban Inequality indicate that relative to other faiths, attending a religious institution, and being Jewish, are significant predictors of participation (Stoll and Wong 2007).

Most recently, scholarly attention has focused on political obligation and post-1965 immigrants like Asian Indian Americans’ patterns of civic and

1999b?

transnational activism (Kurien 2008). In considering post-1965 immigrants, “immigrant diasporic politics will have a decisive impact in shaping the political contours of the United States in the twenty-first century. Such politics challenge conventional understandings of nationhood and citizenship and create dilemmas for multicultural societies trying to institutionalize pluralism” (Kurien 2008, 253). While scholars argue that religion motivates immigrants to civically engage in their communities, more research is needed to explore how specific religious contexts matter in respect to immigrant integration (Ecklund 2005, 3), especially since ascribing a strict ‘assimilation’ or ‘pluralism’ framework inadequately describes contemporary immigrants’ integration into American society (Stoll and Wong 2007; Zelinski and Lee 1998; Newbold and Spindler 2001; Hardwick and Meacham 2005). This article intends to investigate “social and community contexts” (Stoll and Wong 2007), with a special interest on post-1965 Filipino-Americans.

Research questions

Overall, among Filipino-Americans of Hampton Roads, the cultural trope of indebtedness motivates them to become civically engaged but not politically active in the U.S. Specifically, Filipino-Americans believe that if they are politically critical of the government within the public sphere, they may appear to be ungrateful for their “blessing” of U.S. citizenship. Those who are more religiously Catholic tend to especially follow this pattern. There are also Filipinos who are politically engaged (as discussed below), but I should note that those Filipinos, while generally remaining religiously affiliated, are more critical of the Catholic Church. Since most Filipino-Americans in this study came from modest backgrounds in the Philippines, combined with success in a very competitive selection process to enlist in the U.S. Navy (also discussed later in this paper), these first generation Filipino-Americans feel especially grateful because if the U.S. had not recruited them into the Navy then it is less likely that they would have been able to find an alternative path to immigrate and attain U.S. citizenship.

My fieldwork and interview findings lend themselves to the following questions: What does indebtedness mean for Filipino-Americans? How does U.S. citizenship foster indebtedness? What is the role of religion in Filipino-Americans’ indebtedness? First, I define indebtedness through specific quotes that illuminate their understanding of this concept. Second, I attempt to explain why Filipino-Americans often feel indebted

to the U.S.: In order to explain why they may feel this way, I show how Filipino-Americans express a need to contribute to, or in this case civically engage with, the U.S. Contribution may take the form of economic participation (e.g., running successful small businesses or holding a respectable, well-paying job), civic participation (e.g., community centers or Filipino Business clubs), or military service (i.e., the U.S. Navy). On a more nuanced level, I reveal the complexities of certain kinds of contribution; namely, that indebtedness for American citizenship leads to a sense among Filipino-Americans that they should be highly civically engaged, but not active, critical antagonists of the government, because they interpret active, critical engagement with the government as being “ungrateful” for their citizenship. Similarly, if Filipino-Americans are trying to contribute in a meaningful way to their community, state, and nation but not receiving recognition for these efforts, then the indebtedness remains unfulfilled as their contributions are therefore diminished and not valued.

The meaning of indebtedness

What is indebtedness? Dr. Dimaporo, a highly respected Hampton Roads surgeon says:

I could not be happier or luckier than to be a citizen because [in] America anything is possible...So again, what it is to be a citizen? Again, I cannot put the value on that...And all these things the good Lord had just I said again, I cannot...be any more thankful for all the graces and the goodness that I have received throughout all these years...

For Dimaporo, indebtedness is the expression of his gratitude for his American citizenship. Moreover, Dimaporo exuberantly describes his valuable U.S. citizenship in religious terms. It is impossible to disentangle his indebtedness for American citizenship from his faith in God. Rather than a purely secular understanding of the American Dream, or the idea that if one works hard they can achieve their goals in this country, Dimaporo believes that his achievements are gifts from God, and that the U.S., or more explicitly his citizenship, has “spoiled” him. For instance, he implies that he attained high achievements through the years, like a nomination for U.S. Surgeon General amidst an illustrious life story, due to the “graces and goodness” that the “good Lord” bestowed upon him. As a result, he is highly “thankful” for God’s priceless gift of citizenship that he “cannot put the value on.” Dimaporo not only feels a sense of gratitude for his American citizenship and “for what this country has done for [him],” but he also feels indebted to America as a result. His indebtedness mandates

“help[ing] other people.” Considered among the most highly civically engaged members of the community, his conviction to “help other people” arises from a sense of indebtedness. Despite his impressive accomplishments and civic contributions to society, like founding the Chesapeake Care Clinic, the first comprehensive all-volunteer medical center in the country, or being nominated for the position of U.S. Surgeon General, it appears that what he is most enthusiastic about is the opportunity he had to become a U.S. citizen.

Indebtedness is a responsibility and powerful calling to Filipino-Americans in Hampton Roads. Father Dimaano, a Filipino priest who is often invited to local area churches (St. Gregory Catholic Church, the largest Filipino-American Catholic parish in Hampton Roads), civic centers (Philippine Cultural Center), and spiritual centers (San Lorenzo Spiritual Center) to deliver the homily and give his blessing at Filipino-specific Catholic celebrations like fiestas and novenas, also sheds light on Filipinos’ views on indebtedness: “The truth is some families were not, wouldn’t have been able to come or migrate to the United States without the United States Navy ...Eventually they were made, you know, green cardholders; eventually they were made American citizens so they could bring their families here.” Keenly sociological, Father Dimaano rightly indicates that almost all Filipino-Americans in this area acquired American citizenship through U.S. Navy recruitment; specifically, “dads or uncles joined the Navy way back in the Philippines.” Katingdig, a retired navy serviceman, concurs as he explains his sense of indebtedness to the U.S.: “As you mature and get older it becomes a calling. Because of your faith since you are fortunate enough to be here in America you should be able to help other people... Religion played a big part in my life. Born and raised Catholic. I believe in God and faith took us to here, from the Philippines to here (to the United States). It is...more than a blessing.” Katingding religiously frames his experience of citizenship as a “blessing” that compels him to feel that he is “fortunate” to be here in America.” Consequently, Katingding believes he should “help other people.” This feeling exemplifies indebtedness and how, for many Filipinos, U.S. military service can contribute to a feeling of gratitude to the nation-state. Ms. Dakila, who is married to a U.S. navy retired serviceman and is highly politically and civically engaged, shares similarly to Katingding: “I feel that I do have this kind of mentality that what God gave me; I have to use it for Him. If I don’t do this, if we don’t do this, nobody will. All what we’re doing, everything. I feel that we had been given this opportunity, so many classmates are still back in the Philippines,

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they are not here...” Like Katingding, Ms. Dakila feels that God gave her an “opportunity” to come to the U.S. through the Navy and that her classmates were “left behind.” As a result, she feels obligated to give back to the community; if “[she] doesn’t do this, if we don’t do this, nobody will.” Mr. Dayap, an elderly retired military serviceman, also expresses similarly: “I came here to look for a better life. Because everybody is. So I want to give back some by serving the community. I think that’s it. Giving back to the community.” Because Dayap feels that he attained a “better life” here, he feels indebted and views community service opportunities as expressions of his gratitude.

Since 1901 (following the establishment of the Philippine protectorate at the end of the Spanish-American War), the U.S. Navy has recruited Filipinos as mess attendants and stewards, and this recruitment process expanded after the Philippines gained political independence in 1946, with thousands of Filipinos enlisting as military servicemen for the U.S. (State of the Region 2007; or SOR). Following Philippine independence July 4, 1946, the U.S. retained the rights to maintain its large naval base at Clark Field, Subic Bay (south of Manila). During the early Cold War era, the U.S. Navy enrolled up to 2,000 Filipinos annually, out of tens of thousands who applied (SOR 2007). For a large part of the twentieth century, nearly all post-1965 Filipino-American immigrants arrived in the Hampton Roads area via U.S. military recruitment or by way of marriage to a military officer. Filipino military enlistment has been almost entirely concentrated in the U.S. Navy.

My interviewees were all military veterans, married to one, or shared at least one family member (for example, a second-generation Filipino-American whose father served in the military), and overwhelmingly first-generation immigrants. Father Dimaano accurately describes how the U.S. military influence on Filipino-Americans is tied to indebtedness: “the truth is some families were not, wouldn’t have been able to come to or migrate to the United States without the United States Navy.” Because the U.S. historically recruited Filipino-Americans via the U.S. Navy, most Filipino-Americans believe they are particularly indebted to the nation-state because the nature of military service is in and of itself an agreement to honor and serve the U.S. Moreover, given that tens of thousands of Filipinos applied to the Navy and only a sliver of these applicants gained acceptance, the highly competitive nature of the application process (and statistically improbable admittance) for U.S. military service also partly illustrates what indebtedness means, why Filipino-Americans are particu-

larly grateful for the opportunity to immigrate, and how Filipino-Americans link their military service and citizenship status to indebtedness.

Why Filipino-Americans may feel indebted to the U.S.

How indebtedness is tied to contribution or fulfillment of debt

The idea of contribution is another key aspect of indebtedness. Because Filipino-Americans view their U.S. citizenship as a blessing from God, many feel they should “give back” toward the nation-state’s advancement in some small way in order to show gratitude for this “blessing.” For example, Ms. Dajao, who is highly civically engaged in Gawad Kalinga, a transnational organization whose central mission is “building communities to end poverty” and partly involved in Filipino-American Community Action Group (Fil-Am CAG), a political organization that promotes increased Filipino-American political representation and visibility in both the Hampton Roads area and the Philippines, shares that she civically serves the community because it is important to “just give back, giving back to people who need the help, giving back to others in our own communities, supporting our own community.” In this case, part of indebtedness is a feeling of gratitude and another part is the fulfillment of that sense of gratitude through working to contribute some service to the local, and by extension national, society.

To illustrate the role of personal contribution, another interviewee, Ms. Carunagan, a nurse and President of the Philippine Nurses Association of Virginia (PNAVA), states a sense of indebtedness for her American citizenship as a blessing from God. She feels that she can fulfill her indebtedness through civic engagement and political involvement in the public sphere. Specifically, when asked why she is involved in various organizations like Fil-Am CAG or PNAVA, she responds:

Why not? We feel very blessed. We have a lot to contribute, not only in our education, profession but financially; we are blessed. So why should we not? That’s one way of showing our kids that they are responsible citizens, that we are responsible citizens. We believe in role modeling for our children and for the youth that know us. Because to us, it’s returning back favors, returning back blessings, it’s giving back a legacy that we cannot carry when we die. It’s the legacy we want to leave behind that we made a little bit of a difference; we made a little bit of contribution in whatever way we can. To me it’s sense of belonging and sense of contribution. When you belong, you have a sense of responsibility to contribute. If you don’t want to contribute, you better not belong. And when I say contribute; it can be your knowledge,

your skills, and your money, time, treasure, and talent. If you cannot contribute any of those, if not all, you better not belong. You’re [a] dead piece.

Much like Dr. Dimaporo, Ms. Carungan perceives indebtedness in highly religious terms. Ms. Carungan feels indebted to the U.S. and her U.S. citizenship is interpreted as a blessing. Because Ms. Carungan feels indebted to the host country, she wants to “return back favors, return back blessings” or contribute through being a “responsible citizen” and modeling this citizenship for her children. What does contribution mean, then? Ms. Carungan’s explanation entails “knowledge, your skills, and your money. Time, treasure, and talent.” This sentiment also illustrates that contributions to the American nation-state can be made at both the individual and collective level, and to the capacity that each person is able to perform. In other words, if a person does not have money then they may have time to contribute, or perhaps knowledge or skills. To reinforce this point, Ms. Carungan notes that Filipino-Americans “have a lot to contribute” and it is contributing that is at the heart of being “responsible citizens.” Essentially, a sense of indebtedness for “belonging” goes hand-in-hand with contributing and, according to Ms. Carungan, “if you don’t want to contribute” you are considered a “dead piece.” If one does not repay their debt through contributions in some small way, by means of “time, treasure, or talent,” then a person “better not belong” since they are not advancing this country in any proper or meaningful way. What contribution entails, for Filipino-Americans, is a strong desire to repay indebtedness, but the ways in which this repayment occurs need further discussion.

Filipinos are highly civically engaged but not active or critical political actors

Throughout my interviews and fieldwork, I observed that while Filipino-Americans are enthusiastic to contribute their “time, treasure, or talent,” they tended to be highly civically involved yet not active and critically engaged in politics. Filipino-Americans acknowledge indebtedness and believe that in order to fulfill this obligation they must contribute, as discussed earlier. But it appears that Filipino-Americans limit the extent to which they allow themselves to overtly connect to the public sphere. I investigated why Filipino-Americans are highly civically engaged but not active in politics. Father Dimaano sheds light on this inquiry:

Yes, because some families, if not most families, were able to come over to the U.S. through the United States Navy. So it’s our way, maybe, [of]

respecting the manner in which we were able to come and bring our families here and not be involved. *Utang ng loob*, yes, that's another Filipino trait which, again, is influenced highly by one's faith by one's religion... that we are indebted, that we are indebted to God, and we are indebted to anyone who did us any good, any form, you know. So to be active in meaning to say [that] we are active in...supporting politics here but we are not so active in being critical supporters.

Dimaano's comments illuminate why Filipino-Americans largely limit their involvement to civic engagement and religious activities: due to this *utang ng loob*, or indebtedness, being a good citizen means "respecting the manner in which we were able to come and bring our families here and not be involved." This implies that, while Filipino-Americans are highly civically engaged, it may appear to them to be ungracious and disrespectful to the nation-state that did them "good" by blessing them with U.S. citizenship if they are "active in being critical supporters." Therefore, Filipino-Americans are less likely to become actively connected to the political public sphere.

While politically active Filipino-Americans exist—such as Ms. Carunagan, the head nurse in PNAVA and a Fil-Am CAG member, and Kalaw, head of the National Federation of Filipino American Associations (NaF-FAA) and former Fil-Am CAG president—it is clear that indebtedness limits many Filipino-Americans' political involvement. This point is supported and elucidated by Dr. Dimaporo. Dimaporo shared that people like and trust him and that people have approached him to run for political office. While highly civically engaged in the community, Dimaporo has declined these requests for political engagement. When asked why, Dimaporo shared that he simply felt lucky to be a citizen, and that, because of his first-generation citizenship status, he felt there were limitations on the role he could play in the larger society:

I was just very fortunate. I always tell people, when people start: Oh I'm the luckiest man on earth. You better talk to me first: whose luckier, you or me? Because I will tell you why I'm so lucky: I've been so blessed... my work, my volunteerism, my humanitarianism, exigencies, are through mainstream America. I am an immigrant ancestor my adopted country and I just you know have to blend...

In response to his sense of his indebtedness to the U.S., Dimaporo primarily gives back to the community and country at-large through his internationally recognized humanitarian and civic contributions. Dimaporo suggests that it is his U.S. citizenship that empowers him to volunteer and to

give back to the community, though he also believes that he has to “blend” in, or not rock the boat, so-to-speak. Dimaporo’s comment that he has to “blend” strongly overlaps with Father Dimaano’s point about *utang ng loob*; namely, Dimaporo feels it is inappropriate for him to be critical of the U.S. government due to the blessing and opportunity it gave him. By running for and attaining a political appointment, Dimaporo feels that he may be put in a position to act independently, even perhaps to criticize the U.S. government. Consequently, Dimaporo has deliberately limited his political engagement, despite encouragement and requests from the community. On the other hand, Dimaporo optimistically states that his children, second-generation Filipino-Americans who were born here, do not share these limitations and could transcend his achievements and contributions, and run for office. Dimaporo believes that his children do not have any “limitations” or indebtedness to fulfill because the U.S. is their country of birth, or origin. In the next section, I explore how Filipino-Americans’ desire for the American nation-state to officially recognize their contributions to societal development is also part of the fulfillment of *utang ng loob*.

Desire for recognition—the only path toward fulfillment of debt

Filipino-Americans’ desire for recognition stems from their concern to absolve their debt of American citizenship. In order to repay this debt completely, Filipino-Americans believe that it is important for the nation-state to recognize their contributions to the country, as Ms. Dakila explains: “We try to build the reputation of the community.” To that end, on the local and national level, Filipino-American CAG and NaFFAA members like Ms. Dakila and Mr. Kalaw attempt to increase recognition from the nation-state for Filipinos’ contributions. One specific way that these organizations attempt to secure official recognition from the nation-state is through key pieces of legislation that formally recognize the contributions and sacrifices

Filipinos have indeed made for the positive development of the country. It is important to note that this subtle political engagement lacks any semblance of confrontation or criticism with the U.S. government and instead seeks only recognition in exchange for a deferential respect from the community. For instance, Mr. Dimasuay officially legislated the Bataan Day of Valor through the Virginia General Assembly. The Bataan Day of Valor² holds historical significance for Filipino-American military war

2. After the Battle of Bataan in the Philippines from January 7 to April 9, 1942, which ended with the surrender of the American garrison, the Japanese forced marched Fil-

veterans because this holiday honors Filipinos' World War II involvement. Dimasuy strongly values this officially designated holiday because, via legislation, the U.S. officially recognizes the historical sacrifices Filipino-American veterans made to the nation-state.

In respect to Filipinos' military involvement, full citizenship status means not being excluded from public recognition for their historical contributions—Filipinos' involvement in World War II and the Bataan Death March, as well as their ongoing contributions to America's various war efforts. Without clear recognition of Filipino veterans' contributions, Filipinos' indebtedness remains unfulfilled and their sense of citizenship becomes diminished. Since part and parcel of fulfilling indebtedness as a U.S. citizen is not being a “dead piece” as Ms. Carunugan noted, then official legislative acts of recognition for Filipinos' military and war service illustrate that Filipino-Americans, from their point of view, are repaying their debt to the U.S., often in blood. Thus, indebtedness lingers until full and official public recognition occurs in the new nation-state. Ultimately, Fil-Am CAG and NaFFAA's commitment to restoring WWII benefits for Navy veterans and legislative recognition of the Bataan Day of Valor are all part of fulfilling *utang ng loob* and a necessary step toward full citizenship.

How Filipino-Americans' religiosity shapes their understandings of indebtedness and the parallel demands toward repayment of debt

Religion plays a central role in Filipino-Americans' understanding of indebtedness. Gumabay, who is highly religiously involved at St. Gregory the Great Church, shares that without God “I don't think I can function whatsoever...At the end of the day...what did you do to my brothers? That's what I go by every day. It's not the prefix or suffix of my name, actually I don't want any of these things, it's ‘what did you do to the least of my people?’” Gumabay unsurprisingly applies this well-known Bible verse³ as he explains his civic engagement in organizations like Operation Smile and in the greater community. Specifically, he applies God's principles to help the least fortunate because helping the least fortunate is concomitant with helping God, or one of God's children. In similar fashion to Gumabay, Mr. Kabaitan, similarly prominent at St. Gregory, also

ipino and American prisoners of war for 70 miles. Historically known as the Bataan Death March, Japanese soldiers starved and tortured both Filipino and American soldiers throughout this march, leading to the deaths of 18,000-20,000 prisoners of war.

3. Matthew 25:40: “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me,” NIV Bible.

refers directly to God as the reason why she gives back to the community: “Once you have the Lord in your heart, the focus is not on yourself, it just changed me. I want to do more for Him. Because these are your people, this is what the Lord wants you to do. God is in the poor people. When you serve the least of my brethren it is like serving me.” Here, Kabaitan clearly states that she wants to “apply” God’s teachings and do “what the Lord wants you to do.” For Kabaitan, “God is in the poor people (an application of the same sentiment reflected in Gumabay’s question above). It appears both believe that when they help others they simultaneously serve God. Ms. Catapang, who is also highly involved at St. Gregory and in the Wari-Wari Association, her hometown association from the Philippines, comments that, in respect to her civic engagement, she is involved for a “...sense of togetherness, sense of community. It’s all voluntary. Being a part of the group, cohesiveness and the love that you feel. Religion and my relationship to God is foremost to me. It has a strong influence...Whatever I do, God is in my mind and all my actions I’m trying.” Like Kabaitan and Gumabay, Ms. Catapang comments that “helping people is for God” and that whatever she does is for God. Mr. Katinding, a choir singer at St. Gregory and a Free Mason, feels likewise and states, “You always put God first.” Kabaitan, Gumabay, and Ms. Catapang all say that God is the driving force that influences how they think about their civic engagement.

Ms. Cuyugan, another St. Gregory member who is rather engaged in the civic community, stresses the central role that religion plays in respect to indebtedness through her jewelry business. Through her jewelry business, some of her profits go to the Arnel Pineda Foundation and that “without [her] faith and [her] religion [she] probably would not be doing what [she] is doing.” Ms. Cuyugan clearly feels a “calling” to serve God by helping those less fortunate because “God said that what you do to the least of my people you do to me,” a strikingly similar formulation that Kabaitan, Gumabay, Ms. Catapang, and Katingding all shared. She also states that she feels God “blessed” her with a “lifestyle or life,” namely her American lifestyle, that would not be possible without her U.S. citizenship. By helping the “very very poor in the Philippines,” Ms. Cuyugan feels that she is “doing [her] job” to serve God and to make a “difference.” Ms. Carunagan best encapsulates how religion influences notions of indebtedness and the ethos of other Filipino-Americans’ justifies the role of religion in their lives in respect to indebtedness: “Well, to me my religion, my faith, is the foundation of my well-being. Any success I have I give tribute to my creator...Service you give back to other people is the same service that the

Lord showed us we can do for each other.” Ultimately, religion shapes Filipino-Americans’ understanding of indebtedness. They interpret their citizenship as a “blessing” and feel they have to do “service” and “give back to the community” as a way to repay their indebtedness and show gratitude, not only to the nation-state, but to also to show gratitude for the “same service that the Lord showed us we can do for each other.” In other words, indebtedness is tied to civic engagement, or a “calling” to help the “very very poor in the Philippines,” as evidenced by Ms. Cuyugan’s comments. Other examples discussed previously include medical missions in the Philippines, like Gawad Kalinga, for instance. Ultimately, as expressed by Filipino-Americans in this study, repayment of the debt means the following: 1) an official U.S. government recognition for their historical military and socioeconomic contributions to the nation-state; and 2) a civic obligation to serve not just the local Hampton Roads community *but also* the homeland.

“We contribute because of our history”

The history of Filipino-American citizenship has been one of tenuous and ambivalent status. Notions of belonging to the nation-state have fluctuated with various pieces of U.S. legislation that changed Filipinos’ citizenship status, redefining what citizenship entailed. The 1940 Nationality Act defined Philippine “nationals as fully invested members of the American nation-state,” on one hand. On the other, Filipinos “occupied a second-tier status within the U.S. polity, and their claims on state resources and protections were bounded” (Baldoz 2011, 204). For example, pre-1965 Filipinos who arrived on the west coast in cities like Stockton, California, were confronted with signs on doors that stated “Positively No Filipinos Allowed” (Kramer 2006, 404). Although the 1940 Nationality Act formally defined citizens as “fully invested members” of the U.S., racist signs like these illustrate the frequent incompatibility between benevolent American national discourse and anti-Filipino nativist perceptions. In tandem with the official administrative U.S.-Philippines relationship, the U.S. military also shaped discourses and understandings of Filipino-American citizenship, reinforcing Filipinos’ nebulous citizenship status. During the World War I era, the 1914 Naturalization Act attempted to define Filipinos’ citizenship status and rewarded “foreign enlistees with citizenship, but it remained unclear whether Filipinos were actually eligible under this provision, since they were technically classified as ‘aliens’” (Baldoz 2011, 83). Subsequently, even though many enlisted to serve in the U.S. military, Filipinos felt ambiva-

lent about this service since “as a class of persons [they] remained racially ineligible for citizenship in the United States even though they were now subject to military conscription” (Baldoz 2011, 207).

Filipino-Americans’ desire for formal recognition by the American nation-state makes clearer sense in light of this ambivalent history. Contentions over citizenship and full recognition have marked Filipinos as holding an inferior status, not only racially, but also materially due to the discriminatory experiences of Filipinos who first migrated to the west coast. Moreover, given that American national discourse historically framed Filipinos as “little brown brothers” and that the U.S. saw its colonial relationship to the Philippines as a part of the “white man’s burden,” this postcolonial context also clarifies why interviewees like Kalaw stress the need for recognition within the nation-state, insisting that Filipinos are not indeed a “burden.” The reader may ask that, if Filipinos recognize and resent their historically inferior status, why would they feel a sense of indebtedness to the nation-state, given this racialized history? I argue that part of Filipinos’ indebtedness may be attributed to a sense of uncertainty and concern as a holdover from their history. As implied by Kalaw, “...we would like to be recognized here in America. We are not just in numbers here in America. We are a group of people that contributed so much economically here in America. Filipinos are not being recognized as part of the community. I would like to change the mainstream in society, the way they treat us, they look upon us...” To date, Filipino-Americans remain “overlooked by the community as if [they didn’t exist],” and he laments this dominant perception.

Historical discourses on citizenship shape understandings of Filipino-American-ness. It is precisely these paternalistic discourses about Filipinos and their questionable historical citizenship status that contribute to a felt need on the part of Filipino-Americans to repay indebtedness and to ‘prove’ that Filipinos are indeed a positive part of U.S. history and development. Filipinos’ sense of their indebtedness and the need to repay this debt may also come from a desire to show that Filipinos are “worthy” of U.S. citizenship and to demonstrate that citizenship was not a squandered blessing, so to speak.

Conclusion

Filipino immigrants constitute a progression toward empowered citizenship via the religious and civic institutions they navigate. Ultimately, indebtedness leads to a paradox: On one hand Filipino-Americans like

Kalaw would like to increase Filipino democratic political participation in the U.S. and the Philippines, and would like to illuminate the economic, historical, civic, and social contributions that this ethnic group has made. On the other hand, due to the indebtedness that Filipino-Americans feel to the U.S. for their citizenship plus their religious belief that God brought them here, Filipino-Americans see increasing political representation as fraught with the risk of being perceived as ungrateful. Filipinos do not want to bite the hand that feeds them, so to speak.

This paper considers a “broader range of variables, especially those related to migration, in order to arrive at a more complete picture of civic participation among diverse racial and ethnic groups” (Stoll and Wong 1997), with a special interest on a historically understudied group—Filipino-Americans. Ultimately, this paper advances a more complicated and nuanced understanding of America’s newer immigrants as well as Asian-Americans as a group. Filipino-Americans are not necessarily “model minority” citizens or fully docile bodies because they are, in fact, politically engaged and clearly articulate how they have contributed to the growth and development of the nation-state. As stated above, Filipinos lobby for Filipino veterans’ rights, formal recognition via legislation, and so forth. Due to their abiding sense of indebtedness, however, they overwhelmingly refrain from criticizing the government in contrast to other, sometimes vociferous, ethnic/minority groups in the U.S. Therefore, critical engagement with politics is not a priority for many Filipino-Americans because they actually feel that this kind of encounter suggests a sense of ingratitude for their U.S. citizenship, or the opposite of *utang ng loob*. Thus, indebtedness suggests that not only might a person feel gratitude for an act of kindness done to them, but they may also feel that they must repay the debt. Filipinos feel, on a broader level, that they fulfill their debt only when the U.S. officially recognizes their contributions in some way. It is important to note that in nearly all interviewee references to “contributing,” what is really being discussed is local community involvement. For Filipino-Americans, it is through involvement in their local community—as good citizens, honest churchgoers, productive workers, etc.—that a sense of *utang ng loob* is both demonstrated and ultimately repaid.

This paper has attempted to show the role of indebtedness and religion in shaping understandings of citizenship and the various relationships immigrants have with the respective host-nation and public sphere. Indebtedness matters because how people feel about their relationship to the host country they immigrated to influences patterns of immigration

and integration. Indebtedness matters because how people feel about their relationship to the host country deeply impacts their civic engagement and political activism. Specifically, Filipinos’ powerful sense of indebtedness strongly shapes their understandings of what it means to be a good citizen in America as well as the limits of that citizenship. Indebtedness also matters because how immigrants feel about their reception in the host nation will also inevitably influence their self-efficacy and entry into the political public sphere. Filipinos’ sense of indebtedness is intensified by religion as citizenship is seen as a blessing from God.

Further investigation of other Filipino immigrant communities across the country is needed to clarify these understandings of indebtedness. Specifically, would Filipinos who arrived under different occupational backgrounds perceive and interpret their citizenship differently and thus move toward a different trajectory of political involvement? In other words, are east coast Filipinos more likely to express indebtedness due to their military background, or does Catholicism primarily produce indebtedness due to a sense of “blessing” as Katingding had stated? Also, how and to what extent are ‘bridging Filipinization’ and ‘bonding Filipinization’ forms of social capital connected to *utang ng loob*? In other words, do Filipinos in other communities across the United States connect ‘bridging Filipinization’ and ‘bonding Filipinization’ with a sense of indebtedness to the United States for their “blessing of American citizenship? Finally, more research should explore the extent that *utang ng loob* persists and subsequently the kinds of expectations of participation and recognition for the younger generations. Future research on other Filipino communities in the U.S. will shed light on these questions.

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