

Welcoming the stranger: A foreign student's cross-cultural experience in the Philippines

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Abstract

This article is an elucidation of a cross-cultural experience of the author as a foreign student in the Philippines. It is a reflection conceived from the threefold standpoint of cultural psychology, phenomenology, and ethics. Any kind of personal, cross-cultural experience usually takes place within the confines of the existential, ethical, and phenomenological *encounter* between the *self* (the human subject) and the *other*. This exposition considers *that* encounter against the backdrop of a concrete personal experience (existentialism) and of the Levinasian ethics and phenomenology. The setting of the author's *lived experience* is the Filipino way of life (culture) and its indigenous network of moral values. In particular, the subject of this article zeroes in on the Filipino cultural attitudes of hospitality and joyfulness (*la joie*). This author has concretely experienced this twin-value in the course of her sojourn in the Philippines as a foreigner—or, to use Levinas's term, as an *other*. This treatise therefore considers the welcoming and joyful “Face” of the Filipino from the cultural eyes of a foreigner or a stranger. There is a certain measure of paradox in *my* experience—and encounter—with the Filipino as an *other* to me. It is a *paradox* that my own moral *self* has been enriched, and my own self-knowledge has been deepened, by my encounter with the Filipino *other*, to whom I myself am an *other* and a stranger.

Keywords: otherness, self, Filipino hospitality, pakikipag-kapwa, utang-na-loob, Levinasian phenomenology

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1. Introduction: An Overview of the Culture, History, and Geography of the Philippines

The Philippines is an archipelago, which is composed of more than 7,600 islands. It geographically divided into three major regions, namely, Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao. It sits on the Western part of the Pacific Ocean, bristling with rich natural diversities, cultural heritage, and linguistic varieties. According to the study of the *Philippine Statistics Authority* [PSA], (2023), it has around 110 million inhabitants—making it one of the most populous nations in South East Asia. Its *historico-cultural* character consists of many influences: indigenous, Spanish, American, as well as influences resulting from interactions with neighboring Asian nations (Malicse, 2025; Miclat, 2007). Filipinos speak two official languages: Filipino and English. However, the nation speaks many regional languages such as *Bisaya*, *Ilonggo*, *Ilocano*, *Bicolano*, etc. The greater part of the population practices Roman Catholicism—a religious faith forged in the course of about 300 years of Spanish colonization (CIA, 2023). Because of its geographical position along the Pacific Ring of Fire, the country is susceptible to natural calamities such as earthquakes, typhoons, and volcanic eruptions. The experience of natural calamities made the Filipino spirit resilient, flexible, and even fatalistic. Economically, the Philippines has recently been classified as an upper-middle-income country by the World Bank (World Bank Group, 2026).

The Philippines is likewise known for its colorful fiestas, rich traditions, and strong familiar values. Most remarkably, the Filipinos are distinguished by their cheerfulness and hospitality. This twofold characteristic of cheerfulness and hospitality is the key to understand the distinctive Filipino way of welcoming the stranger. To this author who live for over a decade in the Philippines as a student, this unique character trait of Filipinos forms an essential component of Filipino worldview, conduct, and psychology. This article looks into the Filipino psychology of hospitality and joyfulness from the phenomenological perspective and cultural lens. It examines and analyzes this singular character of Filipinos from the standpoint of a foreigner's personal experience and interaction with them. In other words, it delves into the Filipino culture and psychology of welcoming a stranger who lived with them and studied with them.

2. The *Other* in Emmanuel Levinas's Thought

To understand the Filipino sense of joyfulness and hospitality, it helps to consider the identity or character of the stranger (*Other*), as elucidated by Emmanuel Levinas who is widely known in contemporary times as a philosopher of *otherness*. Levinas was born on January 12, 1906 to a Jewish family in Kaunas, Lithuania. He became a French citizen in 1931. World War II saw him serving in the French Army. He was captured by the Germans and became a prisoner of war. His father, mother, and brothers were brutally murdered by the Nazis during the holocaust. Other family relations and friends met the same tragic fate. Needless to say, his wartime experience influenced, to a considerable extent, his thoughts and philosophy.

In 1928, Levinas went to Freiburg in Germany to study philosophy. There he met two other philosophers who greatly influenced him: Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. In Freiburg, Levinas was fascinated with Husserl's phenomenological method—a way of doing philosophy—which he described “as the search for the concrete” (Levinas, 1979). In Husserl's phenomenology, the “concrete” is something *external* or *outside* of the *self*. It later turned out, for Levinas, that the “concrete” is the *Other*, the stranger, the outsider, and the different. Ethically and phenomenologically, there exists a fundamental relation between the *Other* and the *Self*—an ethical relationship that is realized in a face-to-face encounter with a “concrete,” flesh-and-blood human being. In this ethical encounter, the *Other* is symbolized by the “Face.” When I see the “Face,” it both *pleads* and *commands* me. The “Face” demands a response from me. “I can recognize the gaze of the stranger, the widow, and the orphan only in giving or in refusing; [but] I am free to give or to refuse,” Levinas (1979) writes.

Before the “Face,” the self—or I am—is both “master” and “slave.” “[The face [is the face] of the poor, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, and *at the same time*, of the *master*” (Levinas, 1979). The “Face,” therefore, projects weakness and vulnerability and, at the same time, an irresistible power. Face-to-face with the *Other*, I am moved or even compelled to respond to the “Face.” The *Other* commands me to serve her, for the *Other* is the lord and master. The good Samaritan in the parable “acts” like a “slave” to the bloodied victim who is the “master.” In this ethical relation between the *Self* and the *Other*, it is the latter that stands on a higher ethical-phenomenological ground.

3. The *Self* (I am) became the *Other*, a Stranger in a Foreign Land

I arrived in the Philippines in May 2014. It was my first time outside Vietnam, my home country; the first time to be away from my family; and the first time ever boarding an airplane. My English was next to nothing. When I arrived at *Ninoy Aquino International Airport*, I had no idea what to do. I did not even know the person from the *Institute of Formation and Religious Studies* (IFRS), the school where I would be studying, who would come to pick me up. After going through Passport Control, I felt a deep sense of anxiety. I was shaking at the thought of facing the unknown and the specter of uncertainty. Then, as I stepped into the arrival area, I saw my name written on a placard. As I approached the two people who had come to pick me up, my first tears fell—the first trickle in the river of tears I shed while in the Philippines. I was speechless as I approached them with trepidation. I still vividly remember Mary Ann (*not her real name*) putting her arm around my shoulders and saying with remarkable tenderness the very first words I heard in the Philippines: “It’s okay . . . It will be okay.” That was my first experience or taste of Filipino warmth and hospitality.

Finally, the thought that I was now in a foreign land dawned on me. I said to myself: “Now, I’m stranger—in Levinasian terms—in a foreign land.” Being an *other*—a stranger—I had to depend, quite ironically, on *others*. These *others* were also foreigners and strangers in the Philippines. At IFRS, there were students from neighboring countries such as China, Myanmar, India, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka. There were African students as well. It was a community of human beings, characterized by various hues of *otherness*. Since I spoke very little English, I struggled with my studies in the first months of my stay. I had to do a lot of catching up. During my first week, I could hardly talk to anyone, and the other students, understandably, did not talk to me much because they could not understand me.

A student from Myanmar, who eventually became a very good friend, volunteered to teach me English. She spent a great deal of time trying to explain the basics of the language to me. She was very kind to me, and I will be forever grateful to her. As I gained some confidence, I began talking to her in my broken English. She showed me so much understanding and patience. She became the personification of the good *other* to me, upon whom my very fragile *self* had to lean. One insight I gained during my first months of stay in the Philippines is that the *self* (Me) becomes very insecure and vulnerable in the midst of *others*. My *self* was used to be with the reality of *sameness*—*same* food, *same* language, *same* company, *same* culture, etc. The *self* feels safe, secure, and serene in the middle of *sameness*—or, as Levinas would say, in the middle of “totality.” But once the *self* is uprooted from its unfamiliar ground, it feels very vulnerable, insecure, afraid, and even threatened. In my case, my *self* wanted to go back to my home country, to my family, to my familiar ground, to my culture and language. In short, the *self* was pining for its comfort zone—its refuge of comfort.

Living in a foreign country taught me a most invaluable lesson of life—that is, the *self* ought to *depend* and *trust* in others. It was a humbling experience for me to learn how to *trust* strangers (*others*), to learn to deal with the inescapable reality of what Levinas calls “alterity” (*difference*). In living in the midst of *otherness*—in trusting others and strangers—I discovered one paradox of life. Paradox is this: the *others/strangers* exhibit many attributes and qualities I see in *myself*: kindness, compassion, sympathy, etc. However, the *other* will always be different, strange, and *other* to me. Otherwise, if they become completely *like* me, then the *other* will cease to be *other*. The *other* is *other* precisely because of its insurmountable and inscrutable *otherness*.

4. The Filipino and Me

The Filipinos are generally warm, joyful, and helpful. I noticed that they easily smile—an indication of their inner cheerfulness. It is interesting that most Filipinos are *not* aware of this distinct characteristic. It is *not* difficult to understand *why*. This is because the *self* is not naturally self-conscious. It is the *other* that notices the attributes and attitudes of the *self*—which is another paradoxical fact of human existence. Living in the Philippines as a foreign student, I had had the opportunity and privilege to notice distinctive Filipino character traits, which, perhaps, they themselves hardly notice. I do not claim that I already know who the Filipino *is*. My point is to highlight—from Levinas's phenomenology of *otherness*—these cultural or indigenous attributes of Filipino, which I myself had experienced. The first is Filipino kindness which is articulated in their easy smile. Kindness, of course, is a universal virtue present in all peoples. But the Filipino kindness reveals itself in its sunny smile. In the place where I rented a room near my school, people would always greet me with a smile. “Hello *po*! How are you *po*?”

The people in the neighborhood were particularly respectful and welcoming to me. They knew that I lived alone as a student, and they sympathized with my situation. Even without saying a word, they show hospitality simply by smiling. When I would ask a repair man or maintenance worker to do an errand for me, I would call him “*Kuya*!” He would smile and immediately grant and fulfill my request. I also formed many personal bonds of friendship with Filipinos whom I met in the streets, in the jeepneys, in the marketplace, and in school. I had been particular edified by their sense of the *other* and their natural and disarming smiles. Is it because I'm an *other/stranger* to them that they show their warmth and welcome? Or is it because I'm a religious person in the midst of a deeply religious people? I often asked myself: “Is it because I'm a foreigner that Filipinos welcome me with a smile?” Looking back, I now say, “Yes, that's how Filipinos effortlessly show their welcoming attitude.”

Filipinos also treat the strangers/foreigners with joviality bordering on teasing or ribbing. I discovered that this is the Filipino way of making you at ease with them—of welcoming you to their cultural space. If you laugh with them, they will really appreciate you and consider you as a friend. They will even go out of their way to help you and invite you to their homes. I've often wondered why Filipinos are naturally warm, welcoming, and cheerful. I came to think that it has something to do with their system of cultural values and their mindset. The Filipino value of hospitality *can* be comprehended—and understood—within the framework of other primary ethical and cultural values. In other words, the Filipino hospitality is not an isolated or autonomous cultural value.

In the following section, we shall closely look into the other Filipino values intrinsically allied with the Filipino virtue of hospitality, which is, I will contend, in convergence with Levinasian understanding of *otherness*. I will maintain that the Filipino notion of hospitality coincides with Levinas's understanding of it.

5. The Filipino Psycho-Cultural, Ethical, and Moral Universe

The Filipino worldview is constituted by an open-ended and interlocking sets of moral values, ethical assumptions, religious beliefs/convictions, and social relations (Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000). It is against the overarching backdrop of this abstract but real universe that we understand Filipino hospitality and cheerfulness. A tandem of two Filipino indigenous concepts serve as foundations of Filipino mindset and moral universe: *loob* and *sakop*. What is the notion of *loob*? According to Leonardo Mercado (1974), a pioneer of Filipino philosophy, *loob* is a concept that is “holistic” and “interior” reality of the human person. One's interiority is articulated in freedom, which puts a Filipino person “in touch” with his/her fellows. It is an “ethical concept” which is inseparable from other aspects of the human person such as thinking, willing, emotions, and desiring (Mercado, 1974). *Loob* also functions as “moral conscience” and core human identity.

Another Filipino thinker, Dionisio Miranda (1989), defines *loob* as the “human interiority,” “the inner principle of affection,” and “the seat of moral qualities.” This means that the Filipino worldview and its system of cultural and ethical values essentially spring from the moral and spiritual inner self (*loob*). The notion of *sakop* has something to do with one's relation with one's community. The term indicates belongingness and participation.

It signifies “the Filipino’s communitarian spirit (Mercado, 1974). Since birth, a Filipino is raised to be dependent on his family, community, circle of friends, and group. The meaning of *sakop* that one’s *loob* (self) is inherently connected with the circle (*sakop*) of relationships. One’s *loob* cannot stand without or outside of one’s *sakop*. According to Mercado, the concept of *sakop* can be moral or non-moral, ethical or non-ethical familial or non-familial. My preferred playmates form a *sakop*, of which I am part. My family, of course, is my existential and moral *sakop*—stronger and deeper than my *sakop* of playmates.

Having explored these abovementioned primary concepts of the Filipino general outlook and moral universe, we are now properly equipped to deal with *four* other related Filipino indigenous terms and notions

5.1 *Kapwa*

In Filipino psychology and general outlook, **kapwa** commonly translated to “fellow being” or “others.” It means seeing *others* as part of oneself—a **shared identity** between the *self* and the *other* (Aguiling, 2024). According to Maninang (2025), this native concept suggests that people are not isolated individuals. Rather, they are deeply connected to members of the community in particular and of human society in general. In other words, a *kapwa* is one who belongs to my *sakop*. *Kapwa* promotes values like **mutual respect, empathy, and equality**. It behooves people to treat each other—not as outsiders or strangers—with dignity, justice, and compassion. Maninang (2025) further explains that **kapwa** challenges the Western idea of individualism. For it emphasizes the value of community and interconnectedness.

Pakikitungo (surface value) and *Pakikipagkapwa* (deep, ethical relationship)

The essence of Filipino social interaction lies within a hierarchy of relations—moving from surface behavior to profound shared identity. At the initial stage, surface level is *pakikitungo*, which signifies civil attitude and polite interaction. This compasses courteous behaviors, small talk, and adherence to social etiquette. Embracing it at this level is essential for establishing formal interaction among individuals and fostering social cohesion. However, the true richness—and profound meaning—of Filipino relationships is captured in *pakikipagkapwa*. **Pakikipagkapwa** goes beyond mere politeness; it shows *genuine* concern for the *other*. This reflects a deep cultural value that regards human identity as inextricably connected with *others* in meaningful ways.

Utang na Loob (debt of gratitude or debt of volition)

Utang na loob has often been translated as “debt of gratitude.” Kaut (1961) and Andres (1994) characterize it as a sense of obligation that pushes a person to return a favor after receiving help or service—either through future assistance or gifts. The “debt” is often open-ended, as it makes the relationship long-lasting. Hollnsteiner (1961) adds that the return of favor is expected to come “with interest.” However, Enriquez (1977) argues that this idea is a colonially influenced thinking. For it presents the helper or benefactor as a superior figure. In Filipino culture, **utang na loob** is better understood as **gratitude or solidarity**—not a burden or moral imperative. A reciprocal act is not always immediate; it may eventuate years later, even in the next generation. **Utang na loob** reflects deep personal ties and community values.

This spirit is captured in the Filipino saying: “**Ang hindi lumigon sa pinanggalingan ay hindi makakarating sa paroroonan**” (“Those who do not look back to where they came from will not reach their destination”). **Utang na loob** connects Filipinos to their roots, even when they are far from home (Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000). This cultural value is more like an unspoken or unwritten law. As Mercado (1974) explains, *utang na loob* “comes from within.” He further points out, “The law for the Filipino is viewed interiorly, and responsibility rises from within” (Mercado, 1974).

Hiya (Shame)

Scholars like Sibley (1965) defines “*hiya*” as “shame;” while Lynch (1961) describes it as the discomfort or uneasiness arising from a socially unacceptable behavior. On the other hand, Andres (1994) notes that “shame”

can lead to “overspending” to avoid embarrassment. These interpretations overlook or miss the intricacies and subtleties of the Filipino concept of “*hiya*.” Bonifacio (1976) identifies its various forms and shades, which can express both negative and positive feelings. Salazar (1981, 1985b) holds that “*hiya*” includes both internal and external aspects—while Western views often focus only on the external.

Salazar (1981, 1985b) extends by emphasizing that “*hiya*” comprehends the internal and external dimensions. Western interpretations tend to focus solely on the external aspect. A more precise English translation of the Filipino “*hiya*” indicates not merely “shame” but “a sense of propriety”—a culturally ingrained intuition of what constitutes appropriate behavior or proper action. This understanding allows one to appreciate the significance of “*hiya*” as a complex cultural phenomenon rather than a clearly defined emotion. *Hiyâ* is closely related to the notion of **Utang na loob**. **One who is bereft of “debt of volition” is *walang hiyâ*** (Mercado, 1974). Filipinos resent to be described as **walang hiyâ**. This is because it strikes deep into one’s inner self (*loob*). One who is tagged as **walang hiyâ** loses one’s self-respect—and, by extension, the respect of those who belong to one’s *sakop*.

6. Filipino Hospitality, Pakikipag-kapwa, and Utang-na-Loob

As previously noted, the Filipino sense of hospitality and cheerfulness cannot be understood apart from the other Filipino values. In the previous section, we discussed two primary Filipino concepts (*loob* and *sakop*) and four secondary notions (*kapwa*, *pakikipag-kapwa*, *utang na loob*, and *hiyâ*). With these concepts in mind, let us return to the distinct Filipino value: hospitality which always comes with cheerfulness. The key to use is the concept of *pakikipag-kapwa*, a term derived from the substantive *kapwa*, meaning neighbor or fellow human being. In Filipino Psychology, the cultural value of hospitality is exemplified in *pakikipag-kapwa*. As previously remarked, the notion of *pakikipag-kapwa* indicates that the Filipino *self* is intrinsically connected with the members of the community. It is foundational and transpersonal value that regards the external reality—or anything that is *other*—in relational, communal, and spiritual terms (Cervantes, 2025). This entails that one cannot realize one’s full dimensions apart from the members of the family or community.

What is linguistically—or phenomenologically—interesting is that the *kapwa-tao* (translated to English as *other* or *neighbor*) is **not** primarily *other* or different. It literally means *fellow human being*. The term therefore connotes that the *self* and the *other* share a common identity: *humanity*. The moral distinction between the self (*ako*) and other (*kapwa*) thinly delineated. Yes, the *other* is *other*, but the *other* is, in essence, one’s *fellow human being*. This is a distinctive character of the Filipino notion of the *other*. It tears down the *difference* between the Western distinction between the *self* and the *other*. This implies that the *self*, in *pakikipag-kapwa*, is ethically responsible for the *other* in a truly Levinasian encounter.

If a foreigner—an *other*—wonders why Filipinos are naturally welcoming and cheerful, it is because this unique characteristic arises from the wellspring of their *loob*. After living in the Philippines for more than a decade, I’m now familiar with some interesting and distinct modes of behavior. I find it amusing that Filipinos use their mouths pointing at objects and persons. I’m edified that they kiss the hand of their elders, priests, religious persons, and superiors. As earlier pointed out, when they tease you or make jokes with you, that is a way of welcoming you, or that they feel *at home* with you. Filipinos also patiently wait their turn to ride the trains and jeepneys. Indeed, the Filipino, who is an *other* to me, makes me feel part of his/her personal space. There is a beautiful Filipino expression to show their hospitality and welcome. When you enter their home, they say: “*Tuloy po Kayo!*” Literally, it means, “Come in, please!” Ethically and spiritually, it means, “welcome to our world, home, and *loob*.”

7. Conclusion

This article is an exposition of one’s psycho-cultural experience as an *other* (*stranger, foreigner*) in the Philippines. It is both a recollection and a reflection of such an experience from the perspective of the present and from the standpoint of culture, psychology, and phenomenology (Levinas). My cross-cultural experience has enriched my life in ways I cannot fully appreciate and cherish. It is an experience with which any foreign student

in the Philippines can resonate. My student-experience also has a *formative* and *educative* value. Welcoming a foreign student in a warm and sincere way makes him/her feel at home in the school setting and, consequently, makes his/her learning process and development more productive and more profitable. A good way of making a student feel at home is using an inclusive language in the classroom. In the University where I studied, English is the medium of instruction which makes interaction among students possible and enriching. Overall, my sojourn in the Philippines as a foreign student is a beautiful experience of the *other* and me (my *self*).

And what a wonderful experience that is! I have learned many precious lessons in life about Filipinos, their culture, and their worldview. From the phenomenological and ethical point of view, one cannot deeply appreciate *other* peoples unless one lives with them. One has to step out of one's world to be able to enter the world of the *other*. In such a process, one naturally feels insecure and vulnerable. Yet, it is only when one feels insecure and vulnerable that one learns to *depend on* and *trust* the other. Being dependent on the other as well as trusting the *other* is an act of faith or leap of faith. Such a leap is, at the end, very rewarding. This is because one realizes that every people—the *other*—is beautiful and wonderful!

Racism, indifference, and intolerance of the *other* is, for me, an unfortunate ignorance. If only one willingly steps into the *other's* world or if only one welcomes the *other* into one's home/world, one will *discover* a friend or sister or brother in the *other*. I'm now back in my home country where many Filipinos work and live. I now view them *differently* from the way I had regarded them before. It feels like they are now part of my *self*, although they remain other to me—both *master* and *slave*. Thanks to my cross-cultural experience in the Philippines. I've also become more appreciative, more respectful, and more understanding towards foreigners, immigrants, and refugees. In the end, I can say that my encounter with the Filipino other has been a truly Levinasian encounter.

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