

BAHALA NA!¹

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ABSTRACT

A thematic apperception analysis of bahala-na-situation stories reveals character values that point to a basic psychological ascendancy in the Filipino—not submission, surrender, retreat or cessation of effort. The dynamics reflected in bahala na are: the person saying it remains within the domain of the problem; he is accepting of his situation and of things as they are for the moment; he is comfortable with the unforeseeable; he is tolerant of ambiguity and the risky. Bahala na also generates a natural layout for improvisation in the incompletely known future encounter. It is thus suggested that, within the culture, bahala na is a positive, functional response to uncertainty.

A paper by Bostrom (1968) was the initial motivation for this inquiry, while the more immediate occasion was a fortunate access to data from an undergraduate student of anthropology.

Bostrom offers a fair review of the available literature on *bahala na* up to about 1967. She worked on the hypothesis that the *bahala na* attitude of Filipinos has a counterpart in American fatalism. She observed that this fatalistic attitude permeates the daily life and habitual existence of Filipinos and that it is more prevalent in the Philippines than in America.

One notes, however, a lack of data on *bahala na* not only in the Bostrom paper but also in practically all of the references cited by her. On the other hand, data has now been made available for our inquiry, and, though modest in terms of range and sample size, were obtained by a method intended to give materials in story form well suited to analysis and interpretation not very much unlike those of the thematic apperception test.² The purpose here is simply to make a preliminary exploration of possible conceptual elements

in the *bahala na* attitude as a basis for fuller research entry into this area of work.

The Problem

The study of *bahala na* may be regarded as an empirical problem of meaning as defined by relevant situational and contextual conditions of experience.³ An approximation to this kind of definition would be to ask the individual of his experience in concrete situations wherein he uttered *bahala na*. The resulting data could then be distinguished from the more interpretative, inferential, or speculative meanings variously attributed to *bahala na*. The view is that a systematic classification of the facts would be a better foundation on which any construction or inference may be made.

Procedure

Fifteen subjects living in the greater Manila area, were instructed to tell the interviewer a story of some concrete experience where *bahala na* was said. The objective was to obtain data similar to those of the thematic apperception test in psychological assessment

work. There were no picture cards involved, unlike in the standard test where stories are told about pictures presented in the cards.

Using some key concepts from clinical and social psychology, the resulting materials were then coded in terms of meanings directly extracted from the data. This procedure assumes that the framework for classification and interpretation is a significant factor for understanding *bahala na*.

RESULTS

Typical examples were as follows:

Here is one man, in deep throes of suffering, who could not turn to anyone for help. He had been in the midst of life's confusing network of problems, such as being in conflict with his spouse *Bahala na!*

Another, without any plans, had to respond immediately to the gang (*barkada*) who came over to fetch him; but he had to oblige his friends (*makisama*). *Bahala na!*

An individual with nothing worthwhile to do; yet he has to do something and must look for a way. He has enough information, but he wishes to find out what his limitations are, as well as his deficiencies and weaknesses. He is ready to take a chance. *Bahala na!*

A photographer says that he will take some pictures but has only one camera; and he may run out of film, he says, or that the camera may fail to function, and he does not know where all these will lead to, even as he brings all his materials and whatever else. *Bahala na!*

When one has something to be carried out and the means are not adequate, for instance, lack of money when going out on a date. Still he decides to make do with what he has. *Bahala na!*

A student says that he was going to take an examination and there was no more time for any form of preparation. Though unprepared ... *Bahala na!*

One was caught extorting money from someone; a serious offense; no way out, and he was being handcuffed. He cried like a child, saying "*Basta, bahala na!*"

The stories were all very tersely worded, and small as the sample was, even their quality was not quite the ideal protocols that otherwise could be obtained by a skilled clinician doing the psychological test. Still, for a preliminary exploratory step, they are useful as a starting point for parsing out some elements in the *bahala-na* situation.

Bahala-na response is evoked when:

The prospective results or consequences of a situation cannot be determined in advance;

There is a personal deficiency or lack in means, material resources or funding, information or knowledge, and strength, ability or capacity;

The situation is serious or delicate (*mase-lan*);

There is no plan or preparation for any reason at all, e.g. a time factor constraint;

There is no help at the moment for a serious difficulty; and/or

One wishes to find out his limits, his strengths or weaknesses.

In all of the foregoing, one could say that the prospective future, whether distant or near, because of some deficiency or other, is basically uncertain. This uncertainty is a common essential feature of the *bahala-na* situation.

We may consider this very obvious generalization as a first-order coding (categorization) of our data.

Staying yet close to the data, we extract some of the characteristics of the *bahala-na* response, properties which are not so obvious from the vocabulary of the stories but the sense of which may easily be recognized by the native culture bearer. These properties translate into categories of a somewhat abstract nature and describe the dynamics of *bahala na* in a way that is significant for psychological theory. The descriptive categories in effect give us a convenient second-order coding of the materials, which are as follows:

The speaker of *bahala na* remains with the problem on hand. *Bahala na* does not indicate avoidance of the problem; the person stays committed to an encounter yet to be;

This committed thrownness into the future permits him to extemporize on information and events as they come along the way, which is improvisation by definition;

The speaker accepts his situation and things as they are for the moment within his existing perception of present deficiencies and uncertainty as to the future;

There is tolerance for ambiguity in his present situation and his perception of the future; and

There is trust in his capacity to meet any contingency, a fleetingly emboldened self-confidence in the face of uncertainty.

The foregoing descriptive categories lead to the generalization that *bahala na*, as an organic response to unknown outcomes, expresses a psychologically ascendant attitude; not one of surrender or submission.

DISCUSSION

Considering that historically there has been a notable lack of systematically-obtained data on *bahala na*, the materials for this study afforded some range and variety in features which allowed for the application of concepts from contemporary psychology. The main advantage of this procedure over previous speculations on the meaning of *bahala na* is that now there is a somewhat clearer region of separation of the data from any further interpretative constructions.

The method used for obtaining the raw data was one of the many variations of the thematic apperception technique: in this case the subject is instructed to tell a story on *bahala na*, thus approximating the experience in context. The resulting story consequently enables one to identify directly some of the prominence features in the structure and dynamics of *bahala na* directly. The technique also affords the subject some measure of spontaneous behavior wherein he has little or no opportunity to engage in extraneous behavior, e.g. trying to figure out how the story is going to be analyzed. More importantly, however, is that, at this level, the meaning of *bahala na* may be found in the circumstances and personal context of its occurrence in the story. This inquiry adopted this perspective for understanding the immediate controlling conditions of the *bahala na* response.

As a first step, the data were classified by recourse to a few common ideas arising from the stories themselves. The first-order coding reveals that *bahala na* usually is a response to an uncertain distant, or not too distant, future, arising from a perceived sense of personal incapacity for the moment, or deficiency in knowledge, information, or material means for determining the outcome of a situation or course of action.

The second-order coding of the stories, however, is different from the first in that it utilizes some concepts usually regarded as essential to the understanding of psychological functioning. These concepts may even be

"read out" of the protocols themselves, since there is a recognizable "fit" in their application to the data. For instance, the speaker is still within the domain of the problem, a very likely unconscious statement that it is not an escape or retreat from, nor a surrender or submission to his difficulty. He remains within the circle of the problem and, therefore, committed to an encounter yet to be. His possibilities naturally would be different were he not so committed.

Other conceptual features in *bahala na* are that the speaker is accepting of things as they are, of a situation as it is for the moment; has a tolerance for ambiguity; an implicit trust in himself and, therefore, makes the tacit declaration of self-confidence in meeting any future contingency.

All these, as an integral posture, point to a psychological ascendancy in *bahala na*, an entirely contrasted picture to that of fatalism presented in the Bostrom paper.

Beyond the refutation of fatalism, however, has been an unexpected finding, namely, that of a tacitly-induced situational structure for improvisation, which generates an open attitude toward the future. The attitude holds that only the actual event will tell one what can be done, for extemporization is a continuous thread of moments the next one of which may bear new information of its own. One follows the lead of the moment and action shapes itself into the molds of the changing situation. *Bahala na* therefore becomes unconscious practice in the improvisatory, extemporaneous mode.

Still on the same point, in the study of Filipino character, there is the widely-held impression among Filipino native culture bearers that Filipinos are given to improvisation in moments of difficulty or stress. This apparent improvisatory attitude, as opposed to rigid action styles, should perhaps be a good occasion to consider a major hypothesis: that Filipino culture has indeed a built-in mechanism of flexibility and resiliency in *ba-*

hala na for dealing with the pervasively uncertain contingencies of daily living.

Hereabouts, another significant thread in the discussion is the relevance of the culture bearer in the analysis of the data. The culture bearer, as the locus of convergent forces in personal history, the habit system of society and the environment, is possessed of a rich mosaic of experiential processes which can be triggered by word and situation into a patterned response. *Bahala na* is one such trigger for an experience very much shared by other members of the culture. A good part of the experience or response thus triggered and set into motion will likely be spontaneous and unconscious, and, even as it draws essentially from the fertile matrix of the culture bearer's sensibility, much of the dynamics of the *bahala-na* response will remain hidden from him because they are societal automatisms that may be understood oftentimes only through effort at another level of analysis.

The non-culture bearer, on the other hand, probably would be hard put to understand an experience to which he has not been enculturated. For example, a native Japanese who had been some four years in one of our Philippine universities said once that he could not understand what *bahala na* means with all the explanations and reading materials proffered him by his Filipino mentors. A necessary condition for understanding *bahala na* would, in all likelihood, be a prolonged exposure to the culture in the various contexts of its occurrence. The experiential base is the intuitive framework by which this Japanese could have put the verbal materials furnished him altogether into a single grasp of the substantive meaning of *bahala na*.

And finally, one needs reminding sometimes about an appropriate theoretical framework for interpreting the experience of *bahala na*. Many cultural processes are sensitive to ideological appropriation through interpretation, and this is a hazard that must be avoided in research work. The concepts to be utilized must consider very seriously the possibility of

attributions to *bahala na* of meanings that are not really there. For purposes of this inquiry, concepts were chosen from mainstream psychology for coding and analyzing the experience of *bahala na*.

CONCLUSION

Using a variation of the thematic apperception technique for obtaining data approximating the experience of *bahala na*, one finds this idiom a psychologically ascendant, functionally positive response to uncertainty. This is in sharp contrast to the widely-held view that *bahala na* has strains of fatalism in it and that the individual saying it surrenders his initiative and commitment to his problem.

The culture bearer is a significant factor for reconstructing the experience of *bahala na*. A suitable theoretical framework for interpreting the data should be carefully considered. Also, an adequate data base should be able to distinguish itself from speculative or inferential levels of discourse about the subject. And lastly, the problem of understanding *bahala na* includes a prior decision on how to define the meaning of words and verbal expressions. In this study, it was arbitrarily decided to define the meaning of words, for the most part, in terms of the controlling situation and personal circumstances of the expression.

NOTES

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²The Thematic Apperception Test is a technique which requires the subject to tell a story

around each of ten ambiguously constructed pictures. The resulting stories are then analyzed as to how the characters, particularly the central figure, handle their situations in the stories. The stories are assumed to project the personal psychological functioning of the storyteller.

³Meaning in terms of contextual conditions of usage represents the view that meaning is to be found in the controlling circumstances of the speech act, part of which is, of course, in the history of the individual. This is to be distinguished from formal linguistics analysis which, at times, may be useful but which may have little to do with what is going on in the actual verbal situation.

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