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Anthropological Responses to COVID-19 in the Philippines

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Abstract: This article reflects on the roles anthropologists have played in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic in the Philippines, and identifies the challenges – from the methodological to the political – they faced in fulfilling these roles. Drawing on the author's personal and professional experiences in the country, as well as on interviews with other anthropologists, this article identifies three major roles for anthropologists: conducting ethnographic research; bearing witness to the pandemic through first-person accounts; and engaging various publics. All these activities have contributed to a greater recognition of the role of the social sciences in health crises, even as anthropologists struggle to gain the same legitimacy as their clinical and public health counterparts. The article concludes by making recommendations that can better prepare local anthropologists in responding to future health crises.

Keywords: anthropology, medical anthropology, health crises, COVID-19, Philippines, social sciences

Participant-Observers by Necessity

On 21 April 2020, just over a month into what would be called the 'world's longest lockdown', Ugnayang Pang-AghamTao (UGAT), the national organisation of anthropologists in the Philippines, organised a webinar entitled 'Mahirap Maging Mahirap' (literally, 'It's Hard To Be Poor'), in which three anthropologists talked about the predicaments of the poor amidst the pandemic (Toring 2020). Joshua San Pedro, a physician-anthropologist, presented community experiences based on his work as an activist-practitioner with a health NGO, while Carinnes Alejandria, an academic and social health practitioner, shared the lived experiences of people in the urban-poor community in Metro Manila where she did her PhD research. For my part, as the third speaker, I drew on the existing literature on health disparities (Blumenshine et al. 2008) to articulate the ways in which the poor are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of the pandemic.

The webinar, which garnered over 2,300 live attendees, would set the tone for anthropological responses throughout the COVID-19 outbreak in the country, from the moment the first case was reported on 30 January 2020 up to the time of writing. For the first six weeks, the outbreak did not attract much attention beyond the writings of the few practising medical anthropologists in the country (e.g. Tan 2020a, 2020b), but with the announcement of the pandemic and ensuing lockdowns beginning on 15 March, it was the inescapable, defining reality that local anthropologists lost no time in grappling with. Physically cut off from their academic institutions, communities and collaborators, they found their voices within the online spaces and 'workplace intimacies' (Dawson and Dennis 2021) afforded by the 'new normal' of public engagement, teaching and research, helping assert the relevance of the social sciences in the pandemic response while trying to serve as surrogate voices for their interlocutors.

In this article, I narrate and reflect on how these engagements unfolded over the past year as a participant-observer both of the 'lived experience' of the pandemic in the country as well as of these anthropological responses. What does it mean to practise 'engaged anthropology'

(Low and Merry 2010) in the time of a pandemic? And how, in light of our experiences, might we respond in a more effective and empathetic manner in future crises, especially in a political milieu characterised by medical populism (Lasco 2020d) where academics not only face medical concerns, but political risks, given how the authoritarian regime of President Rodrigo Duterte has curtailed civil liberties using the pandemic as pretext (Hapal 2021)?

In particular, I identify three domains of action that characterise and give insight to the scope of these engagements: conducting research; bearing witness to the pandemic in different venues; and engaging various publics, from policymakers to the people-at-large. All of the above reflect – and reinforce – the growing importance of the social sciences in the pandemic response, but also reveal the barriers to anthropologists being able to participate in the kind of engaged, public anthropology that many within the discipline have envisioned, both globally (Lamphere 2004) and in the country itself (Bennagen 1981; Canuday and Porio 2019).

Conducting and Publishing Research

Online database searches may show that only a few anthropological works were published from the Philippines during the COVID-19 pandemic, but far from indicating a dearth of research activities it only indicates that those research activities have not (yet) been completed or published. As the books of abstracts of the UGAT regional conferences in November 2020 reveal (UGAT 2020a, 2020b), anthropologists and other social scientists in the country actively engaged with their interlocutors to document the impacts of the pandemic, charting the responses of Indigenous communities (e.g. Petrola 2020; Taqueban 2020) and exploring various topics, from religion (Guadalquiver 2020; Oracion 2020) and economics (Melendres 2020) to various aspects of everyday life. Like their counterparts elsewhere (e.g. Góralska 2020), they also accepted and embraced various methodologies, from content analysis of social media posts (Vasquez 2020) and phone interviews (Apas and Candog 2020) to auto-ethnography (Oracion 2020) and community case studies (Ballados et al. 2020).

My own experience in conceptualising, planning, implementing and writing research can offer some context as regards the opportunities and challenges of doing these research activities. Even before COVID-19 became officially a pandemic, I had already taken an interest in the practices that it gave rise to, from mask-wearing (Lasco 2020a) to hand-washing (Lasco 2020b). As the pandemic became more of a global concern, funding opportunities and calls for proposals began to circulate, and various colleagues reached out for collaboration. However, the pandemic itself and the ensuing lockdown would overtake such prospects, with people – myself included – having to personally deal with the consequences of a lockdown.

But, like the Japanese anthropologist Wataru Kusaka, who spent time in the Philippine island of Bohol and eventually wrote about the logics of what he calls the 'disciplinary quarantine' under Duterte, I was keenly aware of the 'precious opportunity . . . to directly observe the unique situation' (2020: 424) and acted accordingly. Together with the medical anthropologist Michael Tan, I conducted 'community ethnography' in my home province of Laguna, doing observation and conversation with community members and following political and public discourses online (Tan and Lasco 2021). Among others, we found that people resorted to familiar responses to the pandemic, and negotiated public health measures like mask-wearing and physical distancing depending on the people around them. Our more ambitious project of working with graduate students and other anthropologists around the country to come up with a more comprehensive ethnographic picture did not materialise, and neither did many other research proposals.

The barriers we faced were multiple. For many researchers who contemplated research at the time – especially those who wished to publish their work – the thought of securing ethics approvals alone proved insurmountable, especially with academic institutions shutting down during the height of the pandemic. Personally, aside from the ethnography we managed to accomplish, I turned to political and discourse analyses (e.g. Hedges and Lasco 2021; Lasco 2020d) as another avenue of research that obviated such requirements; other anthropologists drew on previous work and secondary sources to speak to local concerns (e.g. Go and Docot 2021). The exodus to online learning likewise consumed the time and energy of the mostly university-based anthropologists; incidentally, some of these academic challenges were also documented in both the Mindanao and Visayas regional conferences (e.g. Amper et al. 2020; Yap-Buot et al. 2020).

Bearing Witness

Beyond formal research, however, there were other ways to bear witness, foremost of which was simply living through the pandemic, observing its personal and societal impacts, and documenting these through various platforms. As a medical doctor who had not formally practised for several years, I had put my name as a 'reservist' in the country's COVID response, and while I was not called to duty, I would nonetheless practise medicine in a limited

capacity to my family, friends and immediate community, attending to basic healthcare needs at a time when people were afraid of – or could not access – hospitals. In turn, these interactions allowed me to personally appreciate the profound limits of biomedical knowledge and 'expertise' (Veit et al. 2021) – and the attempt to nonetheless offer reassurance, care and therapeutic intimacy amidst this uncertainty (see Colas 2020). As a columnist for the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, I used my columns to articulate many of these concerns (e.g. Lasco 2020c).

In like manner, some of my colleagues took to writing about the pandemic from an anthropologically informed perspective in various media, from newspaper columns to academic journals. 'I do worry that if we get infections here, the virus may spread quickly and we would not be able to cope as China does', opined Michael Tan (2020a) in his column of 29 January 2020, ominously predicting that he would write more columns about the still-mysterious virus. 'The enemy is the virus, not people. And the solutions lie with human solidarity', Tan (2020b) wrote two weeks later, anticipating the government's draconian and punitive approach to the viral outbreak that would find corroboration in later accounts, including accounts by anthropologists (e.g. Sapalo and Marasigan 2020).

Beyond those who were already 'public anthropologists' prior to the pandemic; who had existing platforms, local anthropologists were presented with opportunities to bear witness through deliberate global and local efforts to collect COVID-19 narratives. Jhaki Mendoza, a medical anthropology graduate student, contributed an auto-ethnographic excerpt of what it meant to live in Quezon City in *Social Anthropology*:

> For 27 days now, we have been practising home isolation and disinfecting is a normal domestic routine which I do. I have been getting used to the smell of bleach as I frequently wipe my doorknobs and other surfaces. From time to time, I have to go out to dispose of my trash and do a quick grocery run to convenience stores just below our building. With my face mask on, which is a prerequisite now, I go out of my condominium unit and walk across the hallway. I smell varying disinfectant spray with fruity scents coming from other units. Even our elevator emanates the smell of freshly sprayed alcohol, giving me the assurance that I can be safe from the virus and that we are being taken care of by the property management of our building. For me, this provides not only a sense of safety but also a sense of control during this uncertain time. (Mendoza 2020: 322)

Around the same time, Thea Kersti Condes Tandog (2020a), an instructor in the Mindanao campus of the University of the Philippines, offered a more structural perspective on the everyday violence experienced by poor Filipinos through 'field notes' in *Cultural Anthropology*:

> The Covid-19 pandemic has put into stark relief multiple barriers in the lives of the poor. With the restrictions in movement, the informal economy has taken a significant hit, making thousands of Filipinos unable to work. With no work comes no food. This is especially true for Filipinos who live hand-to-mouth. Hence, many Filipinos are currently saying that if they don't die of Covid-19, they will die of hunger. Furthermore, many of the poor live in slums with no access to clean water, which makes social distancing and proper hygiene impossible. (Tandog 2020a)

Mirroring and drawing inspiration from these efforts initiated abroad, UGAT likewise mounted an effort to organise a *Talaarawan* (literally, 'Diary') series in its website, but, just like its foreign counterparts, it was a fleeting initiative, yielding only a couple of entries (Ruzol 2020; Tandog 2020b). Nonetheless, Filipino academics would continue to find similar venues in the coming months and UGAT's own regional conferences in November 2020 – one for each of the country's three major island groups: Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao – would serve as other venues at which to share these commentaries. These can serve as source materials for future scholarship, not just for what people were experiencing during the pandemic but also for how anthropologists tried to make sense of those events as they unfolded.

Engaging Various Publics

More than researchers and chroniclers, anthropologists also found themselves at the forefront of public and policy engagement in the country. In the first place, anthropologists engaged with each other—and with their students—in the above-mentioned regional conferences, which served not just as venues to share research findings but to cater to community needs, such as skill-building. In the Luzon regional conference, for instance, an entire session was devoted to virtual ethnography (UGAT 2020). Moreover, while most webinars were academic in nature, others attracted media and public attention; anthropologists also participated in policy discussions – even as they were rarely listened to by decision-makers.

One illustrative example was a media briefing organised by a health advocacy organisation on 22

July 2020 to reflect on the first one hundred days of the 'lockdown'. In that event, two out of the four speakers were anthropologists that I already introduced in this article: Joshua San Pedro lamented that 'the country was back to where it started despite taking immense sacrifices from the lockdowns', while Michael Tan gave the government an 'F as in fail': an assessment that made headlines (Maru 2020). Both of them highlighted the impacts of the lockdown on the poor and called for more evidence-based, humane policies.

Beyond interrogating government responses, anthropologists served as advocates for marginalised and minoritised communities, urban and rural alike. The urban anthropologist Mary Racelis,[1] for instance, used her graduate course entitled 'Engaged Anthropology' to get her students to connect with urban communities virtually, and co-write stories with communities, leading to a series of articles in *Rappler* that articulated the struggles of the urban poor (e.g. Calinaya et al. 2020; Tenolete and Racelis 2020).

Anthropologists and other social scientists also participated in policymaking – or at least in policy discussions. Signalling political recognition of the importance of the social sciences even before the pandemic, the membership of one social scientist had been required in the country's recently established Health Technology Assessment Council, and Dr. Alejandria, one of the three speakers in the webinar with which I began this article, has served as a member of the council throughout the pandemic. Medical anthropologists and health social scientists have also been invited by the Department of Health and other government agencies to join consultations. Meanwhile, beyond health affairs, anthropologists have also registered their dissent in policies involving Indigenous peoples (Gatmaytan 2021) and the environment (Taqueban and Lasco 2021).

Research articles can also figure in public discourse, as I found out when one of my articles (Lasco 2020d) was cited in a widely publicised report from *The Lancet* (Sachs et al. 2020). As my article was critical of Duterte, it gained local media attention, but the government swiftly rejected my findings: the same fate that befell other anthropologists who raised critical points about the government's pandemic response (e.g. Lalu 2020). Otherwise, the reaction has been mostly to ignore our recommendations. As one health social scientist casually told me: 'They love convening experts and inviting us in Zoom calls, but in the end, it's the generals who call the shots'.

Discussion: Continuity and Change

Jose Jowel Canuday and Emma Porio note that 'the crafting of Philippine anthropology is firmly situated within the unfolding social and political-economic context of Philippine society and culture' (2019: 45): as in many countries in the Global South, anthropology in the Philippines began as a colonial enterprise, with American anthropologists coming at the turn of the twentieth century to study their colonial subjects. In the post-war years and beyond, however, a more 'applied' dimension of anthropology emerged that saw local anthropologists working in development projects with and for NGOs, international organisations and Indigenous communities, helping produce 'knowledge tools' to advocate for, and contest, policies (Canuday and Porio 2019: 36). In turn, these engagements encouraged a diversification of anthropological interests from health and social issues and environment to social justice, in some ways anticipating and pre-dating calls from Global North anthropologists for a more engaged anthropology.

Held in this light, the responses seen during the pandemic represent a continuity of anthropological praxis in the country that has lasted for decades. However, there are three developments that signify a changing discipline.

First is the embrace of Internet both as a site of study and of public engagement. The pandemic has spurred the use of online research methods, including virtual ethnography, and engendered events for teaching and sharing lessons about these methods. Anthropologists also participated in online platforms and arguably expanded their reach both locally and internationally, transcending barriers normally faced by Global South scholars in being able to participate in such venues. I have also witnessed how more anthropologists – especially the younger ones – have taken to social media platforms like Twitter to participate in both global anthropological discussions as part of #AnthroTwitter and to comment on local developments.

Second, the all-encompassing scope of the pandemic has highlighted the importance of particular sub-fields of anthropology, particularly medical anthropology. While medical anthropology has made inroads in recent years in being institutionalised within public health and medical education (in 2011, a Master's programme in medical anthropology was established at the University of the Philippines College of Medicine, the first of its kind in Asia), the pandemic is the first major health crisis since such developments in which the need for

social sciences has become apparent and recognised in public discourse.

Third, anthropologists, regardless of institutional affiliation have evinced a more activist, and explicitly political, character in their activities – whether in public engagement or in writing – in a departure from the heterogeneous response observed generations ago (Cariño 1980). This is perhaps best illustrated by the conferences in November 2020, in which one of the conveners, Augusto Gatmaytan, spoke of the need to pay attention to 'the state's response to the pandemic' (UGAT 2020b: viii); by younger anthropologists' use of social media to voice their dissent to government policies; as well as by the aforementioned critiques raised by public anthropologists on various platforms.

Amidst and notwithstanding these developments, the pandemic also highlighted a number of major challenges for the discipline, which I discuss alongside some lessons for anthropological practice.

First, the means to do research has been curtailed by the pandemic itself. Notwithstanding the researches outlined above, barriers to securing ethics approvals, financial and human resources, as well as access to the communities themselves have limited local anthropologists' output on top of the pre-pandemic barriers they continue to face in doing research. And while research related to COVID-19 – for example, on vaccine hesitancy – may receive much financial support in the near future, no less relevant topics may suffer what public health scholars have warned as the 'covidisation of research' (Pai 2020). It is clear that if anthropologists are to be empowered and equipped to address emergencies, conventional ethics processes must be reconsidered: an issue that has also been problematised by anthropologists elsewhere (Marino et al. 2020). The Philippine experience suggests that some reforms are already happening (see Lasco et al. 2021), but these need to be further encouraged. Crucially, these efforts must be accompanied by methodological and theoretical innovations that enable anthropologists to be more attuned to the new intimacies engendered by the pandemic (see Colas 2020; and Dawson and Dennis 2020a, 2020b).

Second, despite the visibility of webinars and research publications, there have been limited venues for anthropologists to participate in the public discourse. Those who were able to make use of available venues for wider engagement were those who already had prominent voices to begin with, or those who had public health or medical credentials. And even these few individuals, while they were listened to and quoted by press reports, remained marginalised in actual decision-making; as in other parts of the world, anthropologists found themselves striving for relevance – even as institutions like UGAT and the Philippine Social Science Council facilitated many of the opportunities enumerated above. In this light, documenting the failures and weaknesses of purely clinical approaches to COVID-19, as well as the successes of social scientific critiques in anticipating (or responding to) such failures, can serve as compelling arguments for more meaningful involvement of social scientists in future crises.

Third, the pandemic has also revealed the human resource constraints of the discipline itself. Indeed, only a handful of anthropologists actively work today on health issues, and anthropology itself remains a relatively small discipline in the country; UGAT itself has less than a hundred dues-paying members. Even before the pandemic, a number of factors had dissuaded students from seeking careers in anthropology in the Philippines, from the perception of the field as a low-paying profession to limited opportunities in the country beyond academia (see Go 2018; and Mangahas and Zayas 2018). Of course, the pandemic can also serve as an argument for placing a greater importance on medical anthropology within anthropology and public health, as well as anthropology in general, but this, too, will require institutional support as well as capacity to write grants, pursue international and interdisciplinary collaborations and publish for various audiences, from policymakers to the general public.

Finally, beyond the 'bruises' described by anthropologists elsewhere in the form of 'vitriolic and even threatening anonymous on-line responses' (Besteman 2010: 413), the political risks for anthropologists in the country can be far worse in light of Duterte's disciplinary regime (Kusaka 2020) and the overall 'climate of fear' (Warburg and Jensen 2020) throughout his administration. While academics themselves have largely escaped the fate of Duterte's high-profile critics in politics and journalism, perhaps it has more to do with the fact that they have been perceived as largely harmless to his political standing (though it is worth noting that the museologist and public anthropologist Antonio Montalvan II found himself relieved of his column in the Philippine Daily Inquirer after lamenting 'censorship').[2] As social scientists take on a more prominent voice in public discourse, the fate of their compatriots who have been accused of being communists, drug lords, tax evaders and enemies of the state should invite vigilance on the part of local institutions like

UGAT – and solidarity on the part of the global anthropological community.

Conclusion

This article discussed how anthropologists in the Philippines responded to the COVID-19 pandemic and the relevant government responses to the pandemic, drawing on my *emic* perspective as a public anthropologist in the country. This was by no means a comprehensive account: in part owing to some of the challenges I mentioned above, much anthropological work in the country *on* and *during* the pandemic has surely remained uncharted. Nonetheless, I hope this article has done justice to the range of responses amongst local anthropologists.

My survey reveals that in many ways, anthropological responses to the pandemic have mirrored how anthropology has been practised in the country. But it also reveals a changing methodological, topical and political field. The pandemic has offered local anthropologists an opportunity to claim a seat at the table, not just in national discourses but also, to a lesser extent, in global discourses. As Emily Yates-Doerr and Kenneth Maes (2019) put it, 'scholars located in the so-called Global South have been busy using – while simultaneously remaking – global health's infrastructures in powerful ways'. However, the pandemic has also exposed challenges and risks facing the discipline, both at the individual and the institutional level.

If anthropologists in the Philippines are to be better prepared in responding to the pandemic and other future emergencies, there is a need for continued reflection and collaboration with anthropologists elsewhere on how best we can take the discipline forward amidst the overlapping crises – biomedical, political and environmental – of our time. Indeed, as the eminent Filipino anthropologist Ponciano Bennagan once wrote: 'If the aim of the social sciences is both to understand and transform the world then the claim of the others for self-understanding and self-transformation sends to academics a signal for them to rethink their adaptive strategies to help ensure their survival' (Abaya et al. 1999: 6).

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Notes

1. Personal correspondence, 2 June 2021.
2. Personal correspondence, 3 May 2021.