
TAO: BEING AND BECOMING HUMAN

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Abstract

*The word **tao**, a linguistic and cultural term for a person or human being, is commonly and widely used in a large majority of linguistic areas in the Philippines. To this effect, this study explores the very concept of **tao** and the words associated with it to serve as a key to better understand the nuances of culture and world-view of the Filipinos as indigenous people of the Philippines and of Southeast Asia. To achieve that goal, the paper investigates the linguistic, metalinguistic and philosophical aspects of the **tao**. It first identifies the linguistic areas where the term **tao** and its related words are used, and then presents a metalinguistic analysis of the terms/words linked with **tao**; finally, unravels their philosophical aspects.*

Introduction

Through the years the intellectual pursuit to explicate the complicated nature of humans continues to fascinate philosophers and scholars in various fields of human interests. So much time and effort have been devoted toward a better understanding and deeper appreciation of what a human is in different aspects and perspectives.

Varied and broad as the range and scope of studies about humans are, they embrace practically all fields of learning--philosophy, anthropology, psychology, history, sociology, religion, arts, biology and other related fields. These disciplines aim to delve into the particular aspects of human life so as to dissect the many facets of its cultural, social, political, physical, moral, spiritual, and emotional spectra.

This paper investigates the nature and characteristics of humans, as viewed from Filipino socio-cultural and philosophical perspectives. It identifies the linguistic areas where the term *tao* is used and the words related to *tao* are analyzed for their metalinguistic characteristics. It also explains the philosophical aspects of the word *tao*.

The Word *Tao* in Its Linguistic Setting

The Filipino word for person or human being is *tao*. As a linguistic and cultural term, it is commonly and widely used in a large majority of the linguistic areas in the Philippines. All of the eight major linguistic groups in the country – the Ilukanos of Northern Luzon, the Tagalogs and the Kapampangans of Central Luzon; the Bikuanos of Southern Luzon, and the Cebuanos, Hiligaynons, together with the Warays of Samar- Leyte in the Visayan islands use the word *tao* or its nearest equivalent such as *tau/tauh*, *tawo/tawu*, and *too/tou*.

Significantly, other linguistic groups with big populations and rich culture such as the Maranaos, Maguindanons, and Tausugs of Mindanao as well as the Ibanags and Ivatans of Northern Luzon also use the word. *tao* and/or its derivatives. Furthermore, the word is even found among a group in remote areas of Palawan in central western Philippines who call themselves *tau't batu* (people and stones).

The Word *Tao* and Its Malayo- Polynesian Connection

Tracing the Malayo- Polynesian words associated with the word *tao* would be a big help in knowing and grasping its structural and cultural meanings. A good start would be the exploration of the origin of Philippine languages where the word *tao* is widely used. Suggs (1960) even qualifies that “the Polynesian language has been called the Italian of the Pacific, because of its soft, flowing vocal qualities and beautiful intonation.”

Many linguistic scholars believe that the Philippine indigenous languages belong to the Austronesian languages which are also known

as Malayo-Polynesian languages (Scott, 1984; Llamzon, 1979). The term Malayo- Polynesian was first used by Wilhelm Von Humboldt in 1836, while the term Austronesian was coined by Wilhelm Schmidt in 1899. As Llamzon explained, the term Austronesian is commonly used to refer to the entire family of languages, while the term Malayo–Polynesian is limited to a subgroup within the family. Solheim (2006) in his extensive study about the early maritime people of Southeast Asia, considers the Austronesian as the original language family and that the Malayo-Polynesian languages merely developed from it. What appears more significant is the wide acceptance among linguists and anthropologists of the theory that the Philippine languages belong to the Malayo-Polynesian languages that extend from Taiwan in the north to New Zealand in the south, and from Easter Islands of South America in eastern Pacific to Madagascar of Africa in western Atlantic (Scott, 1984).

Among all Austronesian languages, scholars readily admit that the languages of Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines are the most closely related to each other. These countries together with southern Thailand and the immediate periphery of boundaries of southern Burma, South Vietnam, Cambodia and various islands comprise what is called as the Malay World (Zainal Kling, 1985). The Indonesians and the Malays popularly call the region as **Nusantara**.

Wilhelm Solheim II in his book *Archeology and Culture in Southeast Asia: Unraveling the Nusantao* (2006), used the term **Nusantao** to describe the Austronesians who settled in island Southeast Asia. Solheim’s creatively coined the words- *nusa* (“south island”) and the *tau/tao*, a Filipino term for person or human being. He further explained that the word **Nusantao** refers to the “natives of Southeast Asia and their descendants, with a maritime oriented culture from their beginnings. He approximated that this group of people settled and expanded from southeastern Island Southeast Asia around 5,000 BC or possibly earlier. The central lobe or the core includes the southeastern coast of China, Taiwan and northern Philippines.” Solheim’s hypothesis is congruent with that of Scott’s (1984) and Bellwood’s (1974) although Bellwood also included Indonesia as part of the early “home” of the Austronesians.

Much earlier in 1942 Paul Benedict (cited in Suggs, 1960), an American linguist, concluded that the Chinese words in Thai resulted from the “extensive culture contact with the Chinese and that the Thai, Kadai and Li languages of Formosa were non-Chinese, were interrelated, and had a relationship as a unit to the Malayo-Polynesian language.” To sum up, Greenberg (1950) and Grace (1959), again, as cited in Suggs (1960) present in the grid below the composition of the Kadai-Malayo-Polynesian language:

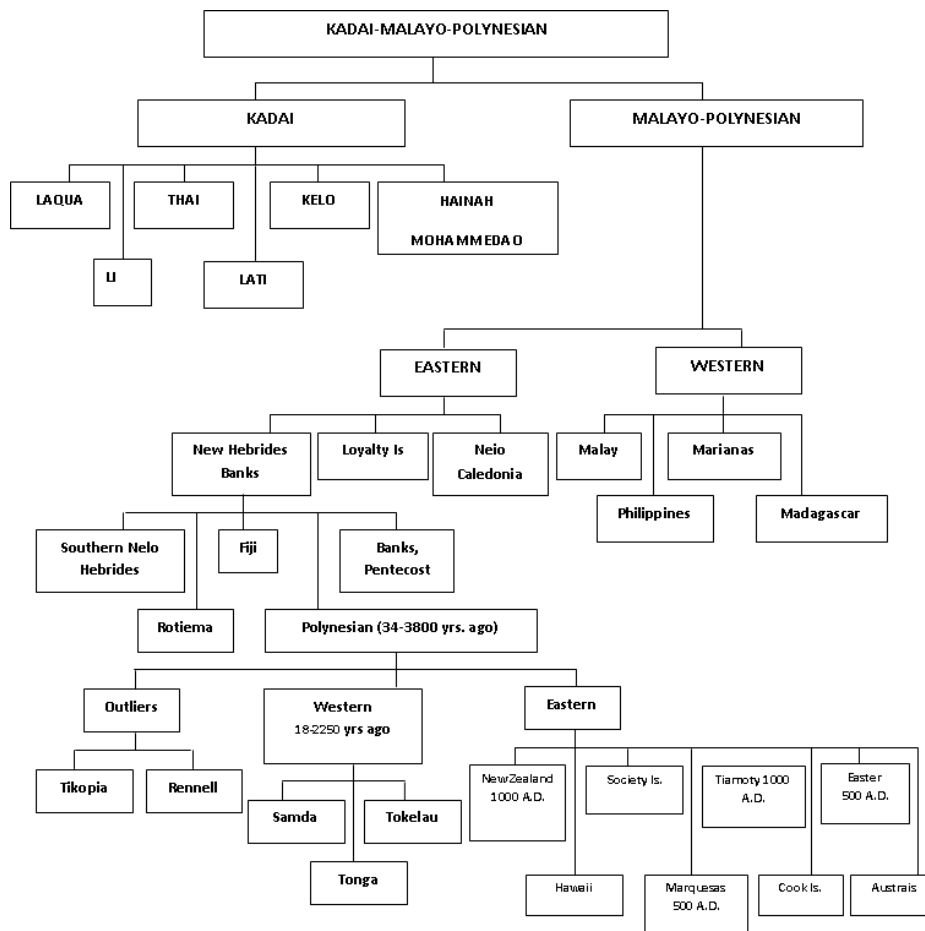


Fig.1 The Malayo-Polynesian Languages

The *Anito* and the *Tao*

The discussion on the *anito* and the *tao* attempts to trace the etymological and cultural affinity between the two.

H. Mohring's study on the *anito* and the words associated with it (Llamzon, 1973) cited Brandstetter's hypothesis (1821) that *tu* is the stem for many Malayo- Polynesian words. Brandstetter further explained that *tu* means to honor, to pay homage and to respect.

Tu is found in many Malay and Indonesian words. For instance, a person of honor and prestige is addressed as *tuan* (sir); an old person is *tua*; God is *Tuhan*; the evil/ bad spirit is *hantu*; the head of the community or grandfather in the family is referred to as *datu*

Mohring made a list of the Malayo-Polynesian words (cited in Llamzon, 1973) with *tu* as the base word. Interestingly, these words are also associated with the word *anito* in structure and meaning:

1. Sumatra and Kalimantan- *nitu* (dead person, spirit, guiding spirit)
2. Taiwan- *itu* (ancestor)
3. Java, Tonga, Futuna- *atua* (to honor/ venerate)
4. Polynesia- *atu* (honorable, respectable)
5. Maori- *nitu* (god, spirit)
6. Samoa- *iatu* (god)
7. Cham- *atau/ atu* (soul, spirit)

Mohring suspected that the word *anito* did not come directly from *tu* but from *ato/ atu*. An analysis of the linguistic form of the word *ato/ atu* would reveal that its stem is *tu*. *Ato/ atu* – so common in many Malayo- Polynesian languages that is still used in some Tagalog areas like Nueva Ecija to refer to a male child or a young man. In its linguistic form, the word *ato/ atu* becomes *inato* when the prefix IN- is added. As a cultural term, Mohring elaborated that the *inato* was a person who has been tested, let alone honored. *Inato* as a Filipino socio-cultural phenomenon was in consonance with the practice in many societies even during the early times that a male had to undergo certain initiation

rites in order to be accepted as a full member of the community. After hurdling the stringent test, the person was then given honor and respect by the community.

Brandstetter, as mentioned by Mohring (1973), holds that the word *anito* resembles *inatu* in word formation and its metalinguistic meaning. The word *anito* consists of the base word *atu* and the affix IN-. The affix IN- becoming NI is a common occurrence in Philippine languages, as in the case of *nilaga* for *linaga* or *niyaya* (invited) instead of *yinaya*. As to its metalinguistic meaning, like the *inatu*, the *anito* which was considered an idol or deity was also the person honored for passing the initiation, a sort of culture hero worthy of honor and respect.

The word *anito*, just like the word *tao*, is found in the majority of Philippine languages, e.g. Tagalog, Cebuano, Ilokano, Hiligaynon, Bikol, Kapampangan, to name a few.

Several descriptions are ascribed about the *anito* (Mohring, 1973). It was considered “idol” (Laktaw, 1914), “souls of the departed forefathers and spirits of rice fields, mountains and other places (Retana, 1895; Agoncillo, 1990)”, and “spirits of a person who had died” (Dempwolf, 1938). In this regard, Loarca, Legazpi’s comrade-at-arm in the conquest of the Philippines in 1565, made an account of the rites and ceremonies of the inhabitants in the vicinity of Manila (cited in Zaide, 1990) imploring the help of the anitos.

“They worshipped a deity called Batala. He was the lord of all, creator of human beings and villages. They said that Batala had many agents under him whom he sent to this world...These beings were called anitos and each anito had a special office. Some of them were for the fields and some for those who journey by sea, some for those who went to war, and some for diseases...”

Loarca also noted that in some places, when the father, mother or relatives died, the people made small wooden idols. He even attested

that a house kept hundreds of these idols. These idols were also called *anitos* in some areas of the country. Blumentritt's mythological, dictionary as cited by Mohring (1973), averred that the Tagalogs calling the idols as *tatao*.

Notably, Mohring was suspecting that the *tatao* could be a cognate of *anito* and even considered the possibility that the word *tatao* is derived from the Tagalog *tao*. This is the closest link so far existing between the *tao* and the *anito* from the linguistic and metalinguistic aspects.

Words Associated with "Tao"

The attempt to present a metalinguistic concept of the *tao* includes among others the search for words related to it. Here is a list of words derived from the root word *tao* with their corresponding meaning/ description.

1. *pagkatao*- the entirety of being human; self- worth of a human
2. *pagpapakatao*- becoming a real person
3. *makatao*- being humane; being concerned with the welfare of human
4. *kapwa tao*- considering others as fellow human and as part of self
5. *pakikipagkapwa tao*- dealing with others as fellow humans and as part of self
6. *katauhan*- personality; wholeness of a person; related with pagkatao
7. *tauhan*-(noun) character in a fiction; in the service of another person
8. *tauhan*- (verb) to take charge; to watch over (cf. *ta-tao*-to be responsible for, to "man" or manage)
9. *panauhin*- guest, visitor
10. *malay-tao*- consciousness, awareness
11. *sangkatauhan*- humanity
12. *taong-bayan*- people, citizen
13. *tau-tauhan*- marionette, puppet
14. *matauhan*- to regain consciousness, to reach one's epiphany

15. *tao po*- identifying oneself as a person of good will before or when entering somebody else's house/ place

Cultural Meanings of the Tao

Various meanings have been given about the *tao*, as viewed from different perspectives. A good place to start is by looking at the metalinguistical description of the *tao* for us to be able to sense the different philosophical, sociological, psychological, and religious underpinnings about the *tao*.

1. Someone who has come of age/ maturity

Cultural communities in various places of the world consider coming-of-age as an important rite of passage. A male who reached the community accepted age of maturity is considered a *tao*. There would be fitting rituals and ceremonies to celebrate the event.

In some Tagalog areas a young adult male is called *bagong tao*. It literally means "new person/human." Culturally, it means a person who has undergone the rites of passage and has reached adulthood. Now considered an adult, he is now esteemed as a *tao*, ready and able to participate in decision makings in addressing family problems and in solving community affairs. As a *tao*, he is presumed to have possessed the moral values to distinguish and judge what is right or wrong. He can now think aloud for his opinion is respected and considered. Being now a full-fledged member of the community, he worthily exudes an aura of respect, honor and authority.

2. Human with honor and dignity

To be a *tao* is to be a human with honor and dignity. A Filipino gives much importance to honor and dignity because of the deep sense of morality, consciousness about his/her being a person and concern for the feeling of others.. A song in Filipino aptly conveys the message in its lyrics "*Di ba ako'y tao ring may damdamin*" (Am I not a person with human feeling?). When s/he says "*tao ako*", s/he wants to be treated

with due respect and honor, but when a person says *nakakahiya* (it is shameful), s/he is expressing an objection to something which goes against his/her moral value.

However, the sense of shame as means of valuing honor and dignity is not exclusive to Filipinos. Indeed, giving importance to honor and dignity is a universal construct – both in individual and group aspects. For one, there is an American song expressing great disgust for “shame and scandal in the family”. In timely digression, even the ancient Greeks make use of such family dishonor in their great tragedies, as in Sophocles’ “Oedipus Rex” or Aeschylus “Oresteia”. While this trait is universal, many Filipinos give much importance to honor and dignity that it becomes part and parcel of their value so beautifully captured in our sense of *hiya*.

Scholars in Philippine society and culture have written so much about the concept of *hiya*. Quito (1987) used the word sensitivity to describe the Filipino sense of honor and dignity. Enriquez (1977) associates this trait with *pakiramdam* (being sensitive to the feeling of others). Salazar (1978) considers the Filipino *hiya* as not just about being ashamed or embarrassed, but also keeping one’s sense of honor and dignity as a person. Like Quito, Bonifacio (1976) believes that *hiya* to a Filipino affects practically all aspects of life, be it physical, social, moral, emotional, economic, and political.

The role of *hiya* is strongly felt in interpersonal communication among Filipinos (Roman 1987). To illustrate, in a conversation, the sender does not tell immediately and directly what s/he wants to say. The first thing s/he would do is to try to sense the mood, readiness and willingness of the receiver to listen and to engage in conversation. S/he would make the receiver feel what is to be communicated even before actually speaking. Using the *pahiwatig*, verbal and non-verbal signals, the speaker gives the hint of what is really being said. The other party, the receiver of the message, uses the *pakiramdam* (sensing or feeling). To perceive the real message put across through the overt verbal means and “covert” non-verbal ways.

3. Human with limited capacity/capability, with frailty

When a Filipino says “*tao lang ako*”(I’m just human), s/he accepts the reality of his/her limitations and weaknesses: making mistakes or committing sins, inability to do things, best, as expected, everything and showing powerlessness over death. In other words, the expression can mean a person’s acceptance, let alone intimations of his/her mortality and finiteness.

Loob: the Inner Self

In Hinduism, the *atman* is the self, the thinking, deciding, acting entity (Ross, Floyd H, & Hills, Tynette, 1993). Freud refers to the self as the ego (Atkinson, 1993) which tells what a person is. It is, in the words of Butler (1986) what identifies a person.

Studies about the Filipino psyche and Filipino philosophy show the close link between the self and the *tao*. But this link goes deeper than that relationship. It involves the *loob*. Literally *loob* means inside or within. Mercado (1974) and Miranda (1989) relate it to the self where mind, feeling, morality, sense of value and the will are expressed. Caberio (1995) made an ethnographic study of the “loob” among the selected poor urban dwellers in Manila based on 4 elements namely, thinking, feeling, willing, and ethical/ moral sense. The study showed that the respondents’ self concept was directly related to their roles and functions as housekeeper, wife and mother. De Mesa (1984) considers the self as the core of being and the unifying force that controls ideas, feeling, decision and action. To Alejo (1990) and Ileto (1979) to know the *loob* is to know the self and to know the self is to know the *tao*.

It is the *loob* that tells about the person as a whole; hence, the fallacy of viewing it as a separate and unrelated entity. Consider the manifestations of *loob* in the following expressions:

1. *magandang loob/mabuting loob* - well spring of kindness, good will
2. *loob/saloobin* - will, feeling

3. *isaloob*- to consider seriously, remember, value, give importance
4. *kaloob* - gift, anything given sincerely
5. *kalooban* - will, acceptance, decision, action
6. *tibay ng loob* - courageous, unwavering, strong
7. *magaang ang loob* - happy, contented, in good mood
8. *kalamayin ang loob* – to feel composed in times of trouble

Any word or action that comes from the *loob* comes from within and is, therefore, true and reliable. It is presumed to having been done with sincerity and purity of intention.

The *loob* is about character, attitude, and feeling. More than this positive attributes, it is equated with the word *will*, but to assume that it resembles the *will* would be an underestimation. For *Loob* is more than the will; *Loob* is more like the inner self, the inner person.

Kapwa Tao: the External Self

To a Filipino, the self extends outward. Being a person is realized not only through the inner self but also with the external self. While this external expression of one's self makes the person complete as a *tao*, the external self is realized through the *kapwa tao*.

Western thinkers have explored the idea of the external self. Buber (1923), cited in Roth (1988) explained that the realization of the self has an external factor- **the other**: the external self. He believes that the self is never understood until it looks beyond itself or at least until it overcomes individual isolation. He further clarified that it is through dialogue with God and other people that we are forced to see ourselves. Childers and Hentzi, cited in Hornedo (2002), consider that the self as "*humanity's particular way of existing is characterized by concern with and care of surrounding ...community members*".

While some Western thinkers consider the concern for external self or other people as the universal nature of human, to Filipinos the concern for other is part of their culture embedded in their psyche, their

language and in their way of life. It is explicitly expressed in the term *kapwa tao* which literally means “fellow being like myself”. From its metalinguistic context, the *kapwa tao*, although a separate person, is like him/her and has to be treated like the self. S/he is considered an extension of the self, or one’s outside self. This fact explains why a person should be sensitive to what others feel and say so as to avoid offending others as the other person would also try to do the same, something akin to the Confucian concept of Golden Rule.

The importance given to the *kapwa* as a fellow human being like the self is manifested in many ways. Quito in her lecture delivered at the University of Malaya in 1987 explained that:

“A Filipino in time of need will never be let down by fellow Filipinos...Even a poor man will share a little of what he has with one who has none. In times of national calamity when personal suffering is at its height, Filipinos come readily to one another’s aid...One can always depend on one’s neighbor in time...”

Fr. James Reuter, an American priest who has been living in the Philippines for 71 years, lauds the Filipino generosity- the attitude of sharing what they have with each other, expressed in the willingness to give (*Philippine Star*, 2009).

To Enriquez (1981), the concept of *kapwa tao* has two general categories- the insider/one-of-us category and the outsider category. Shown below are the types of relationship under these categories:

A. The Outsider Category

1. *pakikitungo* (with civility/ formality)
2. *pakikibagay* (in accord with)
3. *pakikisama* (going along with)

B. The Insider/ One-of- Us Category

1. *pakikipagpalagayang-loob* (rapport/ understanding/ acceptance)
2. *pakikiisa* (being-one-with)

For his part, Lynch (1962) claimed that a Filipino would resort to *pakikisama* (getting along with) as a means of smooth interpersonal relationship and social acceptance. However, Enriquez (1981) considered *pakikipagkapwa tao* (treating others like the self or humanness in dealing with others) as a higher and more important Filipino value than *pakikisama*. When a Filipino, for instance, refuses to cooperate or not to go along may be branded as *walang pakikisama* (uncooperative or does not go along with), but s/he would be slightly bothered or may just ignore the remark if the refusal is a matter of principle or conviction. Yet to be called *walang kapwa tao* (showing no concern for others; lacks humanness) is a serious allegation and considered a personal affront against the individual's social and moral being.

Pagkatao, Makatao, Pagpapakatao

The Filipino core value of *Pagkatao* is expressed in the following three domains:

- 1. Cognitive Domain- Pagkatao** is the wholeness of a person. It is about knowledge and understanding of what a person is or what a person should be.
- 2. Affective domain- Makatao** is being humane or sensitive to the feeling and situation of the other person.
- 3. Psychomotor Domain- Pagpapakatao** is about realization of being fully human shown more concretely through action and determination to attain the goal of total development as a human.

The Goal: Being and Becoming Human

In 1996 the UNESCO convened the International Commission on Education and published its report on **Learning the Treasure Within** (Delors, 1996). One of the significant accomplishments of the group is formulating the Four Pillars of Education- *Learning to Know, Learning to Do, Learning to Live Together, and Learning to Be*.

Since the topic is about being human and becoming human, this writer's interest is in the fourth pillar - that of *Learning to Be*. *Learning to Be* which actually is becoming human. Thus the UNESCO Report states:

"The aim of development is the complete fulfillment of human, in all the richness of his personality, the complexity of his forms of expression and his various commitments- as individual, member of a family and a community, citizen and producer, inventor of techniques and creative dreamer..."

To Heidegger (cited in Hornedo, 2002), to live without asking the question "What does it mean to be human" is to forfeit the authentic existence and to alienate oneself to the central task of becoming and to live in alienation from one's self and others. Expounding on his concept of **dasein** (Being –There) Heidegger considered human existence as participation and involvement in the world around us, and that s/he is always into something

Aristotle believed that the final, the ultimate cause of human is "to be what s/he should naturally be" (Roth, 2002). To be what we should naturally be means to act according to our nature. Therefore, a human should act like a human; a teacher, as a real teacher; an official as an official in the truest sense. By and large, this Aristotelian concept echoes the Confucian tenet of "rectification of names". To act contrary to what a human should be is considered a gross disregard of the teleological nature of being.

The concept of being and becoming human inheres in the Filipino core values, an integral part of his goals, dreams and aspirations as an individual and as a group so that it is embedded in Filipino proverbs, songs, literature, and other work of arts. It is manifested in Filipino attitude and behavior in many ways and in varying degrees.

A Filipino proverb clearly sums up the core concept of being and becoming human- "*Madaling maging tao, mahirap magpakatao*" It literally means "it is easier to be a physical being, but it is difficult to

achieve the fullness of being a real human “. True indeed, we as humans face the everyday challenge of acting as humans as ideally perceived to be. We are in constant struggle of behaving as humans in its truest sense.

Today, humanity is at great risk of dehumanization and alienation. We are bombarded every minute, every hour by advertisements of products and how these products make life comfortable. The media become the convenient means that entice people to yield and to conform to new values and standards. Modern luxuries and conveniences are like the siren’s song luring us to abandon treasured traits and traditions. At times ironically, the machines that make living more comfortable are the same machines that rob us of our being human.

Let us pause for a while and think who we are and what we have been. Perhaps there is a need to look back to the past to find out where we are going and how far we have gone. May be we should even ask if this is the very kind of life that we want to have and enjoy for ourselves.

The Filipino concept of being and becoming human may be considered idealistic, if not construed as unrealistic, but life is about ideals. At this time that humanity is seriously threatened by gross materialism in coping with modern ways of living that distort our values and practices, the great challenge to us is to make the ideal real; otherwise human perfectibility, as the Romanticists claim, could be approximated, if improbable to attain. Our journey is to know who we are and to realize our goal - that of being and becoming truly human in our local community and in the global society.

Conclusion

By analyzing the word “tao” from linguistic, metalinguistic and philosophical aspects, the research has arrived at the following conclusions:

1. The word *tao* is commonly and widely used in indigenous linguistic communities in the Philippines and in some areas of Southeast Asia and the Pacific.
2. The Malayo- Polynesian stem *tu* is the base word of *ato*, while the *ato* is the root word of *tao*.
3. The word *tao* is closely related to *ato/ atu* and *anito* in etymological structure.
4. As to cultural meaning, the words *tao*, *anito* and *inato* referred in one way or another and to some extent to the same person who was “revered, honored and adored” after being “tested or initiated”. Some of them are considered as culture hero.
5. The *anito* is culturally significant among Filipinos.
6. Using the *tao* as the root word, many formed words convey the meaning of being a person/ human in Filipino linguistic and cultural aspects.
7. From its philosophical aspect, the Filipino concept of the *tao* is explicitly expressed in the Filipino proverb “Madaling maging tao, mahirap magpakatao”. (It is easier to be a physical being but it is hard to become truly human in the fullness of its being). This proverb implies that the goal of the Filipino is to become fully human. And to be fully human, a person must realize that the self involves the “loob”. Starting from the inner self, it then extends outward to other persons as *kapwa- tao* to imply that the other person is part of the self, the external self.
8. The word *tao*, in its linguistic, metalinguistic and philosophical perspectives, embodies the Filipino socio-cultural concept of what it is to be human and what a real person should be in the real sense.

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