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Globalization of Waldorf education: an ethnographic case study from the Philippines

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CHAPTER 3

Bringing a Universal Impulse to Filipino Localities

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Abstract Based on three biographies of key actors, this article discusses the introduction of Waldorf education – an alternative educational approach rooted in an early twentieth-century European spiritual philosophy, called anthroposophy – in the Philippines. It examines which encounters, networks, ideas, articulations, and actions have been decisive in these biographies. It adopts a combined biographical and ethnographic approach, called *ethnography of global connections* (Tsing, 2005), focusing on *concrete trajectories of globalizing projects* in so-called zones of *awkward engagement*. Waldorf education in the Philippines can be seen as such a globalizing project, in which certain knowledge is presented as cosmopolitan and universally applicable and is advanced to new Filipino localities by enthusiastic school founders.

Keywords Waldorf education, ethnography of global connections, biographical method

Introduction

When I first arrived at the Gamot Cogon Waldorf School, in rural Panay, I was struck by the beauty of the green oasis that surrounded it, full of bamboo bushes and flower gardens, in the middle of almost fluorescent green rice fields. Scenic footpaths meandered between the classrooms, organically designed in a hexagonal nipa hut style. Sounds emitted from the classrooms, where the morning rituals had started. Children were singing and reciting poems and tongue twisters; I heard clapping and stamping and laughter; the shrill and tentative sounds of recorders, and a guitar; it was a joyful and lively cacophony, cutting through the morning calm.

I reached the school by bicycle, over a bumpy dirt road pitted with rain puddles. I had to cross the nearby barangay, a streetscape of sleepy dogs, scurrying chickens, and curious goats complementing ramshackle stilt houses with corrugated iron roofs, some of which hosted small sari sari stores with tricycles parked outside. People gave me friendly greetings or just gazed at me. I wondered why some of these people had chosen to send their children to a Waldorf school. This poor barangay of farmers, fishermen, and construction labourers was an unexpected location for such a school. How should it be seen: as an anomaly or as a precursor of innovation in the Filipino educational landscape?

This article deals with the question of how Waldorf education was established in the Philippines. Waldorf education, founded by the early twentieth-century Austrian thinker and innovator Rudolf Steiner, refers to an alternative educational approach based on a spiritual philosophical framework called anthroposophy. It was introduced in the Philippines fairly recently – in the mid-1990s.

The arrival and spread of Waldorf education in the Filipino archipelago can be considered part of a globalizing trend that has seen Waldorf education introduced in several countries in recent decades. But general theories of globalization cannot fully explain the trend, because they do not consider the specificity of cases, in which coincidental events and personal efforts and actions play decisive roles. This article therefore follows a specific ethnographic approach promoted by the Anna Tsing (2005). She calls for a study of real encounters, networks, and actions in order to understand global connections and encourages scholars to follow concrete trajectories of ideas and to look for places of change with unexpected, sometimes uneasy connections, so-called zones of awkward engagement. In this article, the story of Filipino Waldorf education is personalized using three biographical accounts of key players in the country's Waldorf movement. These accounts provide an intimate insider's perspective, replete with idealism and strong beliefs that the Waldorf approach provides a positive social impulse to Filipino society. These stories narrate a remarkable new phenomenon in the educational landscape of the Philippines. They reveal how Waldorf education arrived in the archipelago and how it is gradually transforming, its identity becoming more pronounced, through increasing engagement, sometimes awkwardly, with local and social contexts.

Theories and Methods

Ethnography of global connections

Filipino Waldorf education can be imagined as part of a global Waldorf *landscape* – including *flows* of people, money, and ideas (Appadurai, 1996) and including an *imagined community* (Anderson, 1983) with shared images about what Waldorf education should be and should strive for. Such an imaginary derives from an abstract debate on globalization theories in education (e.g. Spring, 2015), including the idea of so-called eduscapes (e.g. Forstorp & Mellström, 2018). Anthropologists have criticized such theories on globalization for exaggerating the abstract and autonomous nature of the globalization process. They prefer to study globalization in an ethnographic way, from below and from within, i.e. researching local perspectives on global trends (Inda & Rosaldo, 2008: 7). They have shown that global trends are perceived, adopted, and resisted in multiple ways at a local level (e.g. Anderson-Levitt, 2003) and that ‘the local’ is informed by ‘the global’ and vice versa. Global trends can even be seen as successfully internationalizing local cultural expressions. *Indigenous education*, for example, is such an expression of the ‘local’ dressed up as ‘global’: Despite international consensus, the meaning given to it is always very specific and local¹ (Gluck & Tsing, 2009). Waldorf education can also be seen as a locally constructed approach with universal pretensions. Its roots are European, it is inspired by Asian spiritual notions such as karma and reincarnation, and it is reformulated in each locality where it gains a foothold.

Tsing, a critical anthropologist (Tsing, 2000; Tsing, 2005; and Gluck & Tsing, 2009), emphasizes the messiness and unpredictability of globalization. She urges scholars to study real encounters, networks, ideas, articulations, and actions in order to understand global connections (Tsing, 2005) and to describe concrete trajectories of circulating globalizing ‘projects’ (Tsing, 2000: 85). She warns us against *globalist fantasies* (ibid.: 69) and *scale-making dynamics* (Tsing, 2005: 55-77), in which cultural claims are made about expansive categories, such as ‘globality’ or ‘locality’, which are often far from neutral (ibid.: 58). Her method, an *ethnography of global connections* (ibid.), focuses on “new places with changing events”, which she calls “zones of awkward engagement” (ibid.: XI), i.e. places where unexpected connections between people and ideas take place. Implicit to these connections is a degree of *friction*, *awkwardness*, and misunderstanding. A Waldorf school that builds upon a European alternative educational tradition in a modern-day Filipino context, is a prime example of such a place of unusual international encounters. In order to describe the emergence and early dissemination of Waldorf education in the Philippines as a concrete and specific process, this article describes thoroughly the views and experiences of three main actors in the Filipino Waldorf community. Their stories – including ideals and expectations, confusions and doubts, successes and failures, and negotiations with their respective social and cultural contexts – describe in a tangible and personal way how this alternative educational approach has been traveling to – and through – the Philippines.

Biographical method

This study makes use of the *biographical method* (e.g. Merill & West, 2009; Roberts,

2002), also known as *oral history, narrative, life story, or life history approach*, in which: “a person chooses to tell about the life he or she lived, told as completely and honestly as possible [...] usually as a result of a guided interview” (Atkinson, 1998: 8).

The *biographical method* recalls specific histories and narratives. Of course, these narratives describe ‘a history’, and not ‘the history’ of an event, since they are constructed from personal reflections. What they do is “offer rich insights into the dynamic interplay of individual and history” (Merill & West 2009: 1) and they reveal personal experiences and thoughts in relation to social and historical events, emphasizing the specificity of social events and grounding historical processes in social contexts. Biographies can also help to reconstruct stories that cannot be reconstructed in other ways, for example because of the limited availability of resources.

All of the above applies to the study of the emergence of Waldorf education in the Philippines. Key to understanding this process is ‘walking in the shoes’ of the main actors and trying to empathize and sympathize with them. What motivated their actions? What did it mean to them? What sustained their motivation?

In this study, three key informants were interviewed in 2017 and 2018 in face-to-face in-depth biographical interviews. My interlocutors were selected for their leading roles in the Filipino Waldorf community and for their different insights about Waldorf education. They are all founders of Waldorf schools, and their stories are interconnected, overlapping, and chronological. The stories represent an imagined journey from the north (Manila) of the country to the south (via Panay to Davao). Of course, many others have played and continue to play significant roles, but I have limited the study for the sake of coherence, text length, and manageability of data. All research participants were very open and willing to talk about their respective biographies, perhaps reflecting the fact that one’s biography is promoted within the Waldorf philosophy, whose core elements include *personal development* and *biography study*.

Writing the stories up, I tried to stay close to the original narratives, but I also had to negotiate them in order to keep them readable, coherent, and of respectable length. Some parts have been summarized, re-ordered, reformulated, or omitted. There was certainly a tension between my desire for ethnographic *thick description* and a limited word count. In addition, there was a more general tension between the complexity of social reality and the rhetorical forms available for writing about that reality (Atkinson, 1992). I have adopted an impressionist style of writing, as described by Van Maanen in his typology of ethnographic writings (1998/2011).

Role of the researcher

Many anthropologists have stressed the importance of reflexivity and transparency towards their own role and position in the field without ‘over-revealing’ themselves. Some personal aspects should be noted here. Firstly, I should mention that Waldorf education is very much part of my own biography. Currently, I combine research about Waldorf education with being a Waldorf teacher in the Netherlands. So, although Filipino

society is relatively unfamiliar to me (I work and live in the Netherlands), the research setting is familiar in the sense that Waldorf education fits my frame of reference. In a way, I am part of the same imagined global Waldorf community as my Filipino respondents. This implies both opportunities and challenges and it heightened awareness of my ethical responsibilities: to be critical about my data, open about my intentions, and reflexive towards the research process.

Concepts and Context

Waldorf education

Waldorf education is an educational approach – rooted in early twentieth-century Germany – based on specific pedagogical and didactical ideas, as well as a spiritual philosophy, called *anthroposophy*, formulated by its founder, the Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925).² Its pedagogical aim is broad *individual development*, including – besides cognitive development – social, moral, artistic, and even spiritual development. This development is thought to follow specific stages linked to anthroposophical images of man (see below), as described by Steiner and other thinkers of the Waldorf movement (Lievengoed, 1987/2005). In the didactics, Waldorf schools pursue a method of so-called *artistic teaching*, meaning that learning activities try to balance activities of *thinking, feeling, and doing*, and are done in creative ways, including storytelling, singing, crafts, and festivals.

Anthroposophy

Anthroposophy provides for a philosophical, spiritual, and ideological framework for Waldorf education. Rudolf Steiner preferred to define anthroposophy as a way of doing science, which includes, in contrast to conventional science, metaphysical aspects. He criticized conventional science for being reductionist and warned against a materialistic culture that could result from such paradigm (Heuser, 2016). Steiner's logic can be explained as: "The realization that the universe is lawful and potentially understandable is of course implicit in ordinary science. But thought itself is not a physical object. Steiner equates thinking and intelligence with spirit" (Evans, 2018: 44). According to Steiner, thinking is a spiritual act that can help people gain esoteric wisdom and fulfil personal aims. These aims are thought to transcend one's lifespan, since ideas of reincarnation and karma are included in anthroposophy as well.³ In that sense, anthroposophy has many antecedents in both European and Asian spiritual philosophies. In contrast to other philosophies, anthroposophy has generated many practical initiatives, of which Waldorf education is an example.

Inherent to anthroposophy are specific images of man and society, which I will briefly describe. These images, which I describe briefly below, are reflected in Waldorf schools, in their curricula, their pedagogical aims and practices, their didactics, and in their visions and mission statements.

Anthroposophical images of man

Images of man include the so-called *threefold image of man* and the so-called *fourfold*

image of man. The threefold image of man assumes that people have spirits, souls, and bodies, related to, respectively, the spiritual world, earthly life, and their interplay. Corporeally, this 'threefoldness' is thought to be found in the head, torso, and limbs, analogous to spiritual activity, soul activity, and body activity. In Waldorf pedagogy, this is translated into activities related to *thinking, feeling, and doing* and into the slogan 'education for *head, heart, and hands*'. The *fourfold image of man* divides humans into a physical body, an etheric body, an astral body, and an 'I'. The physical body refers to material components of the body, whereas the etheric body refers to life forces. Astral bodies refer to desires and feelings and the 'I' refers to our autonomy, unique personalities, and consciousness. The fourfold image of man has multiple applications in Waldorf education and is reflected in its theory on child development, in which every seven years another of the four bodies is thought to be dominant, which requires specific pedagogical approaches. For the first two seven-years-phases, play and imagination are key ways of learning. Only in the third phase are students thought to be ripe for academic learning, abstract thought, and ethical judgment as a result of their awakening 'I'.

Anthroposophical image of society

Steiner's social ideology of *Social Threelfolding* presents an anthroposophical image of society.⁴ It imagines society as a whole as three interconnected sectors: the judicial-governmental sector; the economic sector; and the cultural sector. Each sector has a leading ideal. In the judicial-governmental sector it is equality. In the economic sector, the leading ideal should be brotherhood or cooperation. Finally, in the cultural sector, freedom is considered the most important ideal. Like civil society and the art sector, education is seen as part of the cultural sector. The *Social Threelfolding* ideology is put into practice in Waldorf schools via a strategy that aims for independence from government interference. This sometimes results in disagreement about curricular content, pedagogical approaches, and didactical practices. Moreover, *Social Threelfolding* has traditionally inspired Waldorf schools to strive for the provision of good education for underprivileged groups in society as well as for social change in a broader sense, often explicated in schools' visions and mission statements.

History and globalization of Waldorf education

The first Waldorf school was founded in 1919 in Stuttgart, Germany, by Emile Molt, director of the Waldorf-Astoria cigarette factory. He admired Rudolf Steiner's spiritual thought and social ideology and asked him to devise an education plan for his workers' children. The school's mission was to provide good, state-independent education for the children⁵ of poor factory workers, managed and designed by teachers, as an alternative to what Molt saw as the harsh German school system at the time. It had a clear emancipatory mission, aiming for an innovative societal impulse.

Until World War II, when most Waldorf schools were forced to close by the Nazi regime, Waldorf education had already spread to other parts of Germany and Europe and to the United States. After World War II, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, Waldorf education became popular in most European countries, as well as in North America and Australia, as an important niche of alternative education with related alternative lifestyles, including

a biodynamic diet, anthroposophical medicine, and typical ‘Waldorf products’ – like beeswax crayons, wooden recorders or woollen dolls – as well as a variety of spiritual elements – such as the belief in reincarnation, angels, and a spiritual world.

Since the 2000s, Waldorf education has spread to countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. This trend partly coincides with emerging middle classes (e.g. Johnson, 2014), who embrace new lifestyles (Van Leeuwen, 1996), including eco chic consumption patterns (Barendregt and Jaffe, 2014), interest in sustainability, social responsibility and spirituality (Boland, 2015: 194), and critical views on national education systems. Currently, there are about 1100 Waldorf Schools worldwide in 64 countries.⁶ New Waldorf schools are confronted with multiple challenges, including the development of localized curricula (e.g. Boland, 2015 or Hoffmann, 2016), the attraction and training of staff, difficult interactions with authorities, problems of recognition and financing, and the risk of becoming elitist. There has been a notable increase in the number of Waldorf schools in Asia,⁷ particularly in China. The Philippines is a prime example of a country where Waldorf education has been established in recent years.

Waldorf education in the Philippines

Waldorf education first appeared in the Philippines in 1994 in Manila. Presently, there are six recognized⁸ Waldorf schools in the archipelago. Four in Luzon: Manila Waldorf School (Metro Manila, est. 1994); Kolisko Waldorf School (Metro Manila, est. 2008); Acacia Waldorf School (Santa Rosa, Laguna, est. 2003); and Balay Sofia Waldorf School (Baguio, est. 2009). And two schools in the Visayas and Mindanao: Gamot Cogon Waldorf School (Iloilo/ Panay, est. 2005) and Tuburan Waldorf School (Davao, est. 2012). All are private non-profit schools. Despite limited cooperation between the schools, the absence of national conferences and a functioning umbrella organization⁹, the schools are clearly connected in their networks and histories. They are also actively involved in common international Waldorf events and networks, such as the Asian Waldorf Teacher Trainings (ATT in Santa Rosa, Laguna) or the Asian Waldorf conferences (AWC). Aside of the schools mentioned, there are several places where Waldorf activities have been initiated and Waldorf kindergartens and home-schooling initiatives have started, including Batangas, Cebu, and Puerto Princesa (See map on page 4). Alongside the emergence of Waldorf schools, other anthroposophical initiatives have emerged in the Philippines. The history of Filipino Waldorf education is strongly connected to a few key players, including the ones below.¹⁰

Bella Tan and the First Waldorf School in Manila

The first story is about the idealistic Manileña Bella Tan, who became acquainted with Rudolf Steiner’s philosophy in 1987 following a chance meeting with Nicanor Perlas, a Filipino anthroposophist and activist exiled in the US during the years of martial law under the Marcos regime. Anthroposophy provided a framework for her numerous ideals and thoughts. Together with another enthusiast, Mary Joan Fajardo, she founded the first Filipino Waldorf kindergarten in 1994 followed by a school in 1996.¹¹

I met Bella Tan, a woman in her 60s, in her house in Quezon City. The house had been built by Bella and her husband Jake. “It took us two years to make the soil-cement bricks, lay them and finish the house. Everything is self-made!” We sat down with a cup of coffee in an outbuilding, which was otherwise used for lectures, meetings, and courses, adjacent to Mr. Tan’s clinic for anthroposophical medicine. “This is the room where it all began,” she whispered rather mysteriously. Mr. Tan was also around. After I told him about my research – about the globalization of Waldorf education and about the story of Waldorf education in the Philippines – he responded positively: “It is really important to remind us that globalization isn’t only an economic process, but that it includes social transformation as well!” It was a subject that Bella Tan liked to elaborate enthusiastically about too. At times, she laughed loudly during the interview; at other moments she was clearly moved, as if she was reliving experiences. As the interview evolved, I was impressed by the passion and perseverance that shined through. It was not difficult to imagine that her story had been an inspiration for others. Tan clarified an important motive for becoming an initiator of the Filipino Waldorf movement: “I wanted to be a good parent [...] It were our children who took us to the path of Waldorf education.”

According to Tan, two chapters can be distinguished in her life story: Chapter one is about social activism and idealism and is symbolized by her son’s birthday, 10 December, International Human Rights Day. Chapter two is about her devotion to anthroposophy and Waldorf education. It was symbolized by her daughter’s birthday, 27 February, also Rudolf Steiner’s birthday.

Chapter One

Tan recalled that she and her husband were activists during the 70s and 80s.¹² They met at the University of the Philippines, where Bella studied Sociology and Jake studied Fisheries. After graduating, they worked for an NGO in rural communities, committed to environmental issues and social justice. Through their work, they encountered and espoused numerous alternative and idealistic ideas, such as the practice of permaculture, organic farming, eco-friendly building techniques, vegetarianism, and alternative medicine. Despite their critical attitude towards the Catholic Church and their Marxist inspiration, they “never lost the intuition for things beyond the materialistic.” They were interested in spirituality too. “We were searching. And there are so many paths that you can follow.”

After the birth of their children in the 80s, they strengthened their idealistic lifestyle. They wanted to “give a positive social impulse to the world” through good parenting and by advocating a lifestyle that was considered healthy, both for them and the environment. This lifestyle included a vegetarian diet without refined sugars and alternative natural medical remedies. The TV – “the idiot box” – was banned because of its assumed negative effect on their children’s temper, fantasy, and energy level. And they refused to take a nanny, instead choosing to educate their children in household-tasks in a class- and gender-neutral way. Friends and family were critical: “Everybody was saying: ‘You are crazy!’” Mrs. and Mr. Tan had difficulties in finding a suitable school for their children. They viewed most kindergartens as too academic, with little space for fantasy and play.

They decided to delay sending their children to kindergarten and grade school, to give them more time to play. As an alternative to the mainstream academic curriculum by engaging in various artistic, musical, and practical activities at home as a family.

Chapter Two

1987 was a turning point. Mrs. and Mr. Tan met Nicanor Perlas, a former exile who had lived in the United States. Through him, they learned about Rudolf Steiner, anthroposophy, and Waldorf education. They found a framework for their ideas in Steiner's theories. Tan remembers the first dinner with Perlas as a magical moment: "Due to a brown-out we had to light candles. We spoke about Steiner in the dark. [...] We felt a deep connection to him. It was as if we found a friend [...] We were surprised that we were not the first ones to think the way we did."

From that moment, Mrs. and Mr. Tan studied anthroposophy intensively. They started a study group: "Steiner gave answers and context to a lot of our questions." Soon, new members joined, and the group registered at the General Anthroposophical Society in Switzerland: "We registered in Switzerland, because we saw anthroposophy as a social movement, where we wanted to be part of." Mary-Joan Fajardo was one of the new members. In 1988, the NGO CADI was established, *Center for Alternative Development Initiatives*, in order to bring anthroposophy into practice. Jake Tan focused on health, nutrition, and medicine, Nicanor Perlas on social and environmental issues including biodynamic agriculture, and Bella Tan and Mary Joan Fajardo on Waldorf education. The Tans were awarded training scholarships in Australia and Germany. Fajardo went to New York and Hawaii. Perlas stayed in the Philippines, where, in 1991, Tan and Fajardo had weekly meetings about their dream to set up a Waldorf kindergarten and school. They didn't rush, because they were aware of pitfalls: "You cannot simply transplant practices. You have to adapt it to local conditions." Tan specialized in kindergarten education and early childhood and set up courses on mindful parenting. Fajardo specialized in primary education. After intensive preparations, in 1994, the time was ripe for the first Filipino Waldorf kindergarten with ten children; and in 1996, the first grade of the *Rudolf Steiner Waldorf School* in the Philippines, currently known as the Manila Waldorf School, was established. This was too late for Tan's own children: "I did it for others. And for the Philippines. To give people a choice. Because our educational system [...] is not friendly." Initially, Tan and Fajardo were the only teachers and – until there was a proper school building – the students were hosted in a garage. International mentors, or consultants, were regularly invited to the school during its initial phase. "For us, it felt as a moral responsibility to invite foreign mentors. So that we were truly authentic to the original intention and the original practice of Waldorf education." When the school started to grow, foreign experts were also invited to give public lectures and teacher training in order to prepare new teachers. These were inspirational to initiatives elsewhere. On the initiative of parents, the first level of high school began in 2004 and a full K-12 school programme¹³ was achieved in 2008.

Filipino Waldorf education took off gradually. It took seven years (1987-1994) to go from inspiration to implementation, and about 14 years to become a full K-12 school (1994-

2008). The numbers of new initiatives elsewhere were modest. Tan saw this slowness as the result of anthroposophy being the starting point for Waldorf education in the Philippines: “all daughter initiatives come from the same mother source: anthroposophy [...] anthroposophy itself resonated.” Tan argued that this sequence, from philosophy to practice, instead of the other way around, is typically Filipino and could even be related to what she calls the *Filipino developmental stage*: “We are in the sentient soul, not yet in the conscious or intellectual soul, like Europeans. We are strong with our feeling [...] A planted seed of spiritualism resonates.” According to Tan, angels and spirits, common in Steiner’s lectures, were not strange entities to Filipino’s, who, she explained, hypothetically are quicker to embrace a spiritual framework to education than other nationalities.

Since 2003, Tan has been lecturing about anthroposophy and Waldorf education in the Philippines and abroad: “In every country Waldorf schools are slightly different.” Yet, despite efforts to include local content “whenever appropriate”, the curriculum in the Manila Waldorf School remains largely European. Tan does not consider this problematic: “There is a universal principle in the stories that we use for pedagogical aims. Therefore, stories can easily be used outside their cultural context. We could search for local stories with similar meanings, but this will be a big effort. So far, we rely on the work that is done in European Waldorf schools.” Tan is proud of her role in the birth of Filipino Waldorf education. Despite limited numbers of schools and students, she hopes its impact, its social impulse, is substantial. Waldorf’s goal “to make sure that students can take hold of their own destiny” is, according to Tan, of great social importance. In response to critics, Tan says: “In the end, our children prove that we were right”.

Jim Sharman and Grassroots Waldorf Education in Rural Panay

The second story is about the American engineer Jim Sharman, director and co-founder – together with his wife Teresa Jalandoni and Nicanor Perlas – of a community-based Waldorf school in rural Panay. How did he end up here? In retrospect, Sharman sees great coherence in his life story; as if “everything was leading to this barangay.” Sharman translated Steiner’s social ideology into a Filipino school context.

I interviewed Jim Sharman at his home, located near the school, just outside the rural barangay of Libongcogon.¹⁴ From the school, it was accessible via a small, winding path traversing densely overgrown terrain. From the village, it could be reached by an unpaved road pitted with holes and puddles. The house was his own design, built in cooperation with an architect. The style was recognizable from the school structures. It was surrounded by flower and vegetable gardens, where his staff were at work. The living quarters were situated on the second floor because of the risk of flooding. The interview took place in Sharman’s office on the first floor. Screens on the windows protected us from flies aroused by slaughter time at a chicken farm further down the road. Together with the constant noise of water pumps in nearby shrimp pools and enormous ghetto blasters in the village, setting the mood for an upcoming fiesta, the flies and flooding formed little cracks in this

otherwise paradisiacal place. Sharman, a slender American in his fifties, was an endearing man who talked with passion. His eyes lit up when telling the founding story of the school. He came across simultaneously as a dreamer and go-getter, always producing new ideas: "What if we build a solar panel park in the shrimp ponds? A part of the profit could be for the school." His enthusiasm was contagious. Without explicitly asking for it, the interview quickly took the form of a biographical account: "The story of this school is a personal story. It is very much intertwined with my biography. Everything that happened in my life was leading me to this barangay. It sounds not logical that an American guy starts a school here, so I really have to tell my life story to understand the beginning of the school."

Sharman was born in Texas, in the USA. As graduate engineer he travelled to Europe and Asia. In 1987, he applied to the Peace Corps¹⁵ in Asia, where he was given a volunteer assignment in the Philippines. Initially, he was disappointed with the invitation to the Philippines, because it didn't seem to be as "exotic and mystic" as other Asian countries: People were Christian and spoke English, and the culture seemed to be a hybrid mix with a considerable Western touch. But he accepted the assignment and had a great time. He learned Tagalog and got interested in agriculture and sustainability. After a Master's in ecology and watershed management in the USA, he returned to alternate consultancy work in watershed projects with work for the Peace Corps' training programme.

"And then I met Nick!" Sharman had heard of a course on biodynamic farming, led by Nicanor Perlas. The course would be a turning point in his life. It showed him how different things were interconnected. It involved arts, philosophy, and religion. He was so impressed that he offered to work for Perlas and took a position at Perlas' NGO CADI:¹⁶ "It was an exciting and dynamic time. CADI was involved in the country's ban of pesticides and in awareness raising about biotechnology and sustainability. We published reports, organized conferences, wrote newsletters [...] We were very active." The passion for his job (1994-2001) convinced him to stay in the Philippines: "In the US life was predictable [...] Here I could really live and contribute. This job gave me satisfaction and freedom." Through Perlas, Sharman met his wife Teresa Jalandoni. Perlas invited him to visit his family in Iloilo, to advise on water supply issues. There, Sharman met Jalandoni, who lived in Manila, but whose father was originally from Iloilo. They fell in love and married. Jalandoni was older than Sharman and had children who were already in college, but she felt that "the universe will provide another child." She was right, a son was born in 1996. Subsequently, Sharman's motto became: "the universe will provide." Through his wife, Sharman learned about anthroposophy. She introduced him to the study group of Nicanor Perlas and Bella Tan. "Nick brought anthroposophy to the Philippines. But he did not often use that word. [...] I was surprised to meet him in the study group." Because of the study group and their experiences of parenthood, Sharman and Jalandoni got involved in Waldorf education. They became members of the board of trustees of the Manila Waldorf school and participated in Bella Tan's courses. When their son turned six, they wanted him to have the experience of nature. They moved to Panay, where they could live on land belonging to Jalandoni's family. The land was swampy, but big, 18 ha, which made Sharman's mind work overtime, thinking of possibilities for usage: "Then the idea emerged to put up a community school." Also for their son, who thus far had been homeschooled.

A study group was formed in preparation (2002-2005). Initially, this group sought cooperation with the local public school, but the public school considered their ideas too different from the prescribed government curriculum and approach. They decided to put up a new school, a Waldorf school with a clear mission to be accessible for underprivileged community children. “We explicitly wanted to work from an anthroposophical frame, particularly from Steiner’s social ideas.”¹⁷ They founded the Gamot Cogon Institute (GCI), an umbrella organization with a broad mission to make other initiatives possible as well.¹⁸ Cogon refers to a grass species; gamot means ‘root’ in Hiligaynon.¹⁹ Together grass roots reflects the pursuit of rootedness in the community. In Tagalog gamot means medicine: “The name also refers to our aim to provide a healing kind of education.” Thus, the school is meant to be community-based with a social mission:

From the official mission statement of the Gamot Cogon Waldorf School:

“Working out of the spiritual impulse of Steiner Waldorf Education, our mission is to educate children from Pre-school to Class 12 using a balanced, innovative, and health-giving curriculum. We make this education accessible to all children, regardless of economic or religious background. [...] We strive to become a healing social force that works outward to build community and renew society.”

There were many obstacles to overcome. There were no students, teachers, buildings, or money. Sharman’s persistence and his mantra – “the universe will provide” – moved him forward.

People seemed to just ‘show up’ at the right moment: A banker, who was willing to give scholarships. A teacher, “from a faraway island, but willing to commit ten years to the school.” A Norwegian philanthropist, who donated money to build the first classroom. A well-known Slovenian geomancer, who studied the “spiritual secrets and energies” of the school terrain and ascertained that the place had many child-friendly elementals. Teacher training started: “We tried to include community members [...] but I realized that you cannot make Waldorf teachers, they have to choose themselves”. Finally, students were needed: “When we started the school [in 2005] the room was packed at our first orientation [...] But at the end of the day we opened up the class with just four children.” Over the years, numbers increased, up to 265 students in 2017. The school stood out for its mix of poor community children and urban middle-class children.

In retrospect, Sharman acknowledges that it was not always easy. Even now, there are many struggles: critical authorities; weak finances; a lack of qualified teachers.

“There have been many, hundreds, thousands of moments that challenged me, that it was more logical to stop [...] but on an inner level I dedicated my life to the initiative. [...] There are countless instances of impossibilities coming together [...] and the universe had provided.”

But the work is important and, according to Sharman, not limited to this community:

“Sometimes we forget to see the bigger picture. Every initiative that is done consciously can become a portal for what wants to emerge in the future. That is why we are always open to visitors. I personally believe that Waldorf education isn’t just nice or fancy. I believe [it brings] a new civilizational impulse.”

Kate Estember and Mundane and Inclusive Waldorf Education in Mindanao

The third story is about Mindanao-based Kate Estember, who co-founded a Waldorf school in Davao instead of going to a convent, following an inspirational meeting with Nicanor Perlas in the aftermath of his failed presidential campaign in 2010. Together with colleagues she successfully translated Steiner’s fourfold image of man into a school profile, and she is currently exploring ways to innovate the curriculum and make it more inclusive.

I met Kate Estember at West Visayas State University, in Iloilo, at a conference on anthroposophical medicine that brought together an interesting hodgepodge of people, including some well-known persons from the small, but vivid Filipino anthroposophical community. There were also many teachers, who believed that their educational practice held healing qualities. The full eight-day programme included lectures, discussions, and artistic exercises. We studied texts, discussed human development, and evaluated our personal life courses. That year, the theme was ‘biographies’; it did not feel strange, therefore, to conduct biographical interviews during the breaks. Estember was keen to tell me that it did not really matter whether we talked about the genesis of the school or about her biography, since both were intertwined. I was impressed by the wilfulness of this apparently strong and autonomous woman.

Kate Estember was the youngest of twelve children in a rural family in South Cotabato, Mindanao. As a child, she was impressed by her mother, who combined volunteering for the community with work on the land and within the household. Her example gave Estember strong sense of service. Moreover, from a young age, she was often checking people for what she called “true intentions” and “true love”.

Sadly, she did not find sincerity and love in school. “I always had the feeling that [the teachers] were doing things because they had to keep to their agenda or just had to finish a lesson.” She was rebellious and often bored in the classroom and she did not feel that teachers cared about her. Despite her aversion to the educational system, ironically, she chose to work in education in 2003, first as a student counsellor and then as university lecturer, after studying psychology in Iloilo. Two sources of inspiration awoke her interest in education: Firstly, Paolo Freire’s book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972). Secondly, a lecture by Nicanor Perlas at her university on Artificial Intelligence (AI). “I told myself education is the way to contribute to society, because it shapes perspectives and cultures.” Despite her choice to work in education, her concerns about insincerity remained. She felt uneasy about being part of an educational system that, in her eyes, contributed to a society driven by commercialism and materialism. She resigned in 2011 and was considering entering a

convent, which she imagined a good place to deal with her life questions.

Meanwhile, she got involved in the 2010 presidential campaign of Nicanor Perlas. Perlas lost, but a group of supporters had organized themselves – in order to continue the work they envisioned for the country – in a movement named MISSION (*Imaginals for Sustainable Societies through Initiatives, Organizing, and Networking*): “‘Imaginals’ typically bike, walk, and grow their own food or buy them organically and biodynamically. They patronize green businesses, prefer homemade products, take only natural remedies when they get sick, and support the visionary education of Steiner/Waldorf schools.”²⁰ MISSION organized courses and gatherings, such as the *Aletheia* meeting in 2011, in Iloilo, in which Estember participated. She considered it a turning point in life, because it made her decide – without prior knowledge of Waldorf education – to found a Waldorf school in Mindanao instead of going to a convent, in order to initiate educational and social transformation: “One of the nights [Perlas] asked [Sharman] to share the story of Gamot Cogon. [...] it felt as if it was the first time that I met someone who was authentic in his work. [...] The idea for the school was born there and then. The impulse that had grown throughout my biography found its trigger point at *Aletheia*.” At *Aletheia*, Estember started to imagine the possibility of a Waldorf school with Maya Flaminda Vandenbroeck, also from Mindanao. They decided to cooperate in “[bringing] Waldorf education to Mindanao”. They chose Davao as location, believing it to be a good place to initiate such an educational innovation. They registered the school despite having “[n]o money, no building, no parents, no children, no knowledge.” They began with courses on Waldorf education at the Gamot Cogon Institute and in Manila (Tan’s course). Then, with some seed money and support from friends and family, they were able to build a school.

In June 2012, a year after their radical decision to start a school, the first class opened its doors to twelve children from an interesting mix of backgrounds, professions, and statuses – “[...] a tricycle driver, a rock musician, and a lawyer” – from all over the city. Vandenbroeck handled external tasks such as fundraising and legal issues, while Estember worked and lived in the school, carrying out a variety of functions:

“Normally, I got up at 4am. Then I did exercises, cleaning, gardening, finance work, communication for carpooling, and preparations for class. Then from 9am to 1pm I had class. We started late because children came from far and we lunched at school. After 1 [...] I was janitor and cleaner and did a nap. I journal my observations and prepare for the next day. I had a full agenda.”

In the second year an extra teacher was hired, and the school reflected on its organization and identity. It had changed its name to the *Tuburan Waldorf School*, or, officially, the *Tuburan Institute*. *Tuburan*²²¹ means wellspring or source and refers to the purifying and healing qualities of water, related to “a healing kind of education”. It also refers to a spiritual source, i.e. its anthroposophical base. A model based on *social threefolding* was used for the management, with one person responsible for business aspects (Vandenbroeck), one for cultural aspects and curriculum (Estember), and one for administration (a volunteer parent). The school’s identity was envisioned in the

anthroposophical *fourfold image of man*, in order to support the development of the students in the school, and expressed in *four pillars of the school*:

The four pillars of the school (paraphrased from the interview)

1. *The physical pillar*, related to the physical environment of the school: “We are a nature school with quality of environment, and with eye for biodiversity and sustainability [...] and stimulating [...] the sensory development of the children.”
2. *The etheric pillar*, related to the ‘life forces’ of the school. “We are a community school, where children work and learn together in a learning community.”
3. *The astral pillar*, related to the feelings and culture within the school. “We have a contribution scheme,²² based on capacity and willingness, to make it possible to have students from different backgrounds. We aim for diversity and in dealing with differences, feelings are involved, that relate to astrality.”
4. *The ‘I’ of the school*, related to its distinctive core identity: “The core of the school’s identity is being a Steiner-Waldorf School, based on anthroposophy. That is the I of the school.”

According to Estember, *Tuburan* can be characterized by its sense of community. Since Davao is a hybrid and diverse patchwork of cultures and religions, the school’s first concern was to build a school community in which differences were valued and respected. Therefore, Estember believed it important to rethink the curriculum, which, in her view, should be informed by cosmopolitan, as well as local knowledge. She tried to incorporate local features into the curriculum, even though it took a lot of time and research “to make them fit in a Waldorf way.” “For example, this year we included an *indigenous track*. Because there are so many indigenous groups in Mindanao. We want children to be aware of that.” On the other hand, Estember explained that this did not mean doing away with European aspects in the Waldorf curriculum, including Grimm’s fairytales, fables of La Fontaine, Nordic and Greek myths, and stories of historic events in Europe. It prompted her to ask, what is local? Many local cultural practices appeared exotic to city dwellers in Davao (“not practiced and not known anymore”). Estember based her considerations on a grand tour that she made around Mindanao: “I have visited the Maranao in Iligan and Marawi, the Talaandig in Bukidnon, and the T’boli in Lake Sebu, in South Cotabato. And I plan to visit the Yakan in Tawi Tawi and the Sama. [...] I observed their dances, stories, and crafts.” Estember judged many practices she observed as unsuitable or even “unhealthy”. “The very core of the culture relates to the understanding of who they are as a tribe. It is true to them. [I wonder] how to deal with these indigenous aspects. We shouldn’t copy it, because it doesn’t resonate with who we are or want to be. For me it is about the now. What is the existing culture? What is our culture? What is the culture in the school?”

After numerous initial challenges, the school now seems to have a solid base. Both the school and Estember were starting a new life chapter. Indeed, Estember has planned a sabbatical and a journey to Germany, to learn even more about Waldorf education and anthroposophy.

Analysis and Discussion

Firstly, I must point out that there are limitations to the approach of this article. While biographical accounts can offer insight into lived perspectives of events, they may simultaneously imply one-sidedness and limited analytical distance. By staying close to these stories, a particular view on the history of Waldorf education in the Philippines is presented, one that is neither objective, nor complete. The inclusion of other perspectives – both from the inside (such as teachers', parents', or students' views), as well as from the outside (such as outsiders', opponents', or officials' views) – would have led to additional insights. Consequently, the article's scope is rather narrow. Moreover, the chosen approach for analysis – based on the writings of Anna Tsing – has obviously influenced the outcomes and considerations discussed.

That said, I will now focus on what the extraordinary stories in this article do say, despite the above-mentioned limitations:

1. They are unique and personal and offer insight into the interplay between the biographies of Filipino school founders and the introduction of Waldorf education in the Philippines.
2. Following Tsing (2000; 2005; Gluck & Tsing 2009), the stories provide insight into a concrete trajectory of a 'globalizing project', in this case globalizing Waldorf education, including concrete encounters and networks, ideas and articulations, and actions.
3. The stories provide us with a picture of places experiencing changing events, or, in Tsing's vocabulary, "zones of awkward engagement" (2005: XI), in which local constructions of what Waldorf education should be are presented as 'universal knowledge', especially in relation to the Waldorf philosophy – anthroposophy – and curriculum. On the one hand, the stories show successful integration of school visions and practices with corresponding biographies and contexts. On the other hand, they reveal occasional friction, related to processes of localization to Filipino contexts.

Ad 1. Three biographies on the history of Waldorf education in the Philippines

The specificity of each story can be found in the guidelines and arrangement of the stories and the backgrounds of the school founders that shine through in the respective school identities. Tan's story is ordered into two chapters, one about idealism and social activism and another about anthroposophy and Waldorf education. Chapter two can be seen as a continuation of Chapter one and the central role for anthroposophy in 'her' school can be seen as the result of Tan's view of anthroposophy as a '*framework for ideas*' and '*a social movement*'. The guideline in Sharman's story seems to be the idea of destiny ('*the universe provides*', '*everything was leading to this barangay*') and his NGO background might have motivated a school mission aimed at social justice, poverty reduction, and community development. Esterember's storyline is about her quest for sincerity and love, and her critical stand towards the educational system motivated her to establish an alternative school, in which a caring learning community is central, in which differences are respected and celebrated.

Ad 2. The trajectory of Filipino Waldorf education as part of a globalizing project

In addition to their singularity, the stories are connected, overlapping, and chronological. Together, they give an insight into how ‘global’ Waldorf education established itself in the Philippines, geographically spreading southward, encompassing encounters and networks, ideas and articulations, and actions.

Encounters and networks

The stories are literally connected through encounters. Sharman learned about Waldorf education from Tan, whereas Estember was inspired by Sharman and trained by both Sharman and Tan. Perlas played an important role in every story, albeit in different ways. All schools were operating in international Waldorf networks and were advised by international Waldorf advisors, called mentors. Over time, the reliance on these networks seemed to decline somewhat and the desire for autonomy and national cooperation grew. This is reflected in, among other things, the schools’ identities, which have become increasingly pronounced and grounded.

Ideas and articulations

In anthroposophical terms, the schools’ identities seemed to develop from a *one-fold* via a *three-fold* to a *four-fold* model. *Anthroposophy* has been central to the identity of Tan’s school. This aspect was adopted by other schools. With Sharman, *social threefolding* emerged as a key identity feature. This principle was adopted in Davao, where the school identity was consolidated in the ‘four pillars’ of the school, modelled after an anthroposophical *fourfold image of man*. A *nature school*-pillar, linked to nature and sustainability, and a *cultural inclusive school*-pillar, committed to a diverse school community, were added. This crystallization of school identities is linked to other Waldorf schools in the Philippines, which have illuminated these identity aspects in different ways, either stressing a green image, community or inclusiveness, or anthroposophical spirituality.

In terms of articulations, anthroposophy provided for specific jargon. Notable is that Waldorf education was repeatedly typified as healing education or as a social impulse to society (or a *spiritual* or *civilizational impulse*). *Development* and *community* are also among the buzzwords. Sometimes, the multiple meanings of these words led to confusion. *Development* and *healing* could refer to individuals or society for instance, community to a school community or society at large, and a *social impulse* to individual social contributions or to Waldorf education as a whole. These double meanings were sometimes consciously connected. For example, development of society was believed to be linked to personal development. This is illustrated by Tan’s quote on Filipino development – “We are in the sentient soul; we are strong with our feeling” – which is confusing and stereotypical.

Actions

From the establishment of CADI (*Centre for Alternative Development Initiatives*), GCI (*Gamot Cogon Institute*), and TI (*Tuburan Institute*) as precursors of the schools, we can conclude that Waldorf education was seen as part of a broader set of anthroposophical

initiatives. This implies that, alongside a Filipino Waldorf community, a broader anthroposophical community was formed. It has an outspoken lifestyle, including an organic diet, natural medical remedies, and typical ‘anthroposophical products’, as well as a variety of spiritual elements, such as the belief in reincarnation, angles and a spiritual world. Altogether, this led to a specific ‘anthroposophical identity’, functioning as a subcultural niche and linked to a broader ‘global imagined community’. This identity is expressed in, for example, the definition of so-called *imaginaries* in Estember’s story, or seen in the do-it-yourself mentality of Tan and Sharman (who built and co-designed their own houses).

Moreover, we must consider the apparent reliance of new schools on the strong personalities of school founders and the speeding up of the implementation process: For the first school it took seven years to prepare for the opening (1987-1994), in Panay three (2002-2005) and in Davao only one (2012).

Ad 3. **Filipino Waldorf schools as zones of awkward engagement**

Filipino Waldorf schools can be seen as places with unexpected connections between people and ideas. Each school struggled – in its own way – with the question of *how to make Waldorf education fit* in its new contexts, involving processes of spiritual, social, and cultural embedding, and implying – despite its obvious successes – a certain amount of misunderstanding or friction.

Firstly, spiritual embedding took place, because of the spiritual philosophy of anthroposophy. According to Tan, anthroposophy was central in the founding process of Filipino Waldorf education. The anthroposophical ideas of a spiritual world with spirits and angels coincided well with widespread Christianity in the Philippines. Tan even thought that Filipino’s embraced a spiritual framework to education more easily than others. On the other hand – despite the statement that anthroposophy is not a religion – a number of Filipino teachers, parents, and students struggled with the incorporation of anthroposophical spiritual ideas like karma and reincarnation into their Christian belief.²³

Secondly, social embedding took place, which was easier in urban settings than in rural settings, where a middle-class subgroup felt attracted to Waldorf education and its associated lifestyle and ideology, even though incidentally there might have been social friction within personal networks (as was noticed in the story of Tan for example: “Everybody was saying: ‘You are crazy!’”). In Panay, the school is unique for its rural setting and the constitution of classes, in which students of different social backgrounds study harmoniously together: the farmer’s daughter with the doctor’s son, the rural kid beside the urban kid, the rich and the poor together in the playground. This can be judged a huge social achievement. On the other hand, the school was an anomaly in the area, which led to misconceptions and suspicion in the community as well. Some even jokingly called the school *skuelahan sang kano*, ‘American school’, a term that probably did not refer to the schools’ director so much, but to its international vibe, its *awkwardness* in the village, and its regular international visitors, such as of Waldorf advisors.²⁴ Despite the aim to be a grass-roots community school, it was difficult for the institution to be fully accepted

as such. This is illustrated at various points in Sharman's story, for example, the failed cooperation with the local public school, the initial difficulties in attracting community students, and the unsuccessful attempt to train and hire villagers as teachers.

Finally, all schools had to embed Waldorf education in a cultural way, especially in relation to the curriculum. On the one hand, *awkwardness* and *friction* in this domain is related to a broader Filipino context, with diffuse and hybrid images on national identity (e.g. Zialcita, 2005) and continuous debates on the localization of the national curriculum (e.g. Maca & Morris 2015; Mendoza & Makayama 2003). On the other hand, it is related to the perceived universality of Waldorf guidelines. This was especially noticeable in Estember's story. 'Her' school was committed to a diverse school community, reflecting the cultural context of Davao and Mindanao. Consequently, she wanted to combine cosmopolitan knowledge with local knowledge, in which – interestingly enough – 'cosmopolitan knowledge' referred to an internationally shared Waldorf curriculum, which, when examined closely, is quite European, including European stories, European historical events, European cultural festivities, and references to European nature and seasons. The other school founders shared similar ways of thinking. Anthroposophical principles and European curricular aspects were considered to have universal applicability, compared to local Filipino stories and materials, which were considered difficult "to make them fit in a Waldorf way". In discussions on the localization of school practices, the underlying philosophical framework of Waldorf education, anthroposophy, as well as the curriculum – which had been shared and reformulated constantly in international networks but still encompassed many European aspects – was barely questioned as being 'culture specific', despite its specific roots. Although, in fact, 'local', it was acting as 'universal'.

Notes

- 1 See Article 14, UNDRIP (United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples), 2007.
- 2 Steiner's work encompasses over 350 books, including collections of about 6,000 public lectures. His most famous work on education is *Study of Man, General Education Course* (1919).
- 3 See, *inter alia*, Rudolf Steiner (1901), *Reincarnation and Karma*.
- 4 See, *inter alia*, Rudolf Steiner (1919), *Towards Social Renewal; Rethinking the Basis of Society*. Steiner considered his ideology a good alternative to all the major ideologies of his time: capitalism, communism, and fascism.
- 5 Boys and girls were in the same classroom, which was still uncommon in 1919 in Germany.
- 6 'The Waldorf World List' (2018), www.freunde-waldorf.de; unrecognised initiatives are excluded.
- 7 'The Waldorf Movement in Asia' (2011), www.freunde-waldorf.de.
- 8 The schools are all officially recognized by the Philippine authorities. Five of them are also internationally recognized by the General Anthroposophical Society, in Dornach, Switzerland. The Kolisko Waldorf School is not.
- 9 The existing organization RStEP [*Rudolf Steiner Education in the Philippines*] is not accepted by all schools. Currently there are negotiations of setting up the Association of Waldorf Schools in the Philippines.
- 10 Of course, there are other important people. One of them is Nicanor Perlas, who is a key actor in all stories. He wrote a book on present-day social threefolding (Perlas, 1999) and is a known environmentalist. He led an NGO that was precursor of the first Filipino Waldorf School. In 2010 he ran for president.
- 11 Both Nicanor Perlas and Mary Joan Fajardo passed away during the course of this research project.
- 12 Roughly the period of martial law in the Philippines (1972-1986) and the Marcos -dictatorship, which ended with the so-called EDSA Revolution, or People's Power Revolution (a series of popular demonstrations in 1986).
- 13 K-12 school means from kindergarten to grade 12. In 2011 the department of Education started to implement the K-12 system in the Philippines. www.officialgazette.gov.ph/k-12/
- 14 The barangay Libongcogon is part of the municipality of Zaraga, in the Province of Iloilo, located on Panay.
- 15 Peace Corps is a U.S. government run volunteer programme for cultural exchange and development aid.
- 16 Centre for Alternative Development Initiatives, see also in the story of Bella Tan.
- 17 Although CADI hadn't worked with the concept of anthroposophy, the ideology of social threefolding was actively promoted. Sharman was influenced by Perlas's ideas on social threefolding.
- 18 CADI served as an example to GCI (Gamot Cogon Institute).
- 19 Hiligaynon is the local language in the province of Iloilo. Also, Ilonggo.
- 20 From the school's website, see <http://turbaninstitute.org/the-friendships-that-started-it-all/>
- 21 In Bisaya (also Cebuano or Visayan), which is the main language spoken in Davao.
- 22 The contribution scheme goes even beyond the socialized tuition fee at Gamot Cogon Waldorf School. It means that parents contribute on the basis of capacity and willingness. Contributions do not only include money, but also services, expertise, and materials.
- 23 > 90% of the Filipino's identifies as Christian (approx. 80% Catholic), <5% as Muslim.
- 24 As international researcher I am also part of that foreign entourage of the school.

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Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press. Intermezzo: The Story of Sisidlan

The Story of Sisidlan

From my research notes:¹

An interesting addition to the previous chapter is the Sisidlan School (Metro Manila, founded 2019), which I visited in 2020. It provides a complementary perspective, especially in view of the next chapter on Eurocentrism in the curriculum. Among Philippine Waldorf schools, the Sisidlan School is arguably the most distinctly Filipino. It places great importance on ensuring that pupils feel at home and grounded in their own culture, combining Waldorf ideals with an explicitly Filipino curriculum and adopting Tagalog (the official national language of the country) as the language of instruction. These choices have given rise to a form of Waldorf education unique within the Philippines, yet they also raise questions.

Using Tagalog as the medium of instruction proves complex in practice. Most pupils speak English at home – and with one another. Yet, Tagalog – whose influence in the urban middle-class milieu is declining – offers them new possibilities for connection, a sense of belonging, and pride in their heritage and identity. Pupils also learn the traditional script, Baybayin, which they read and write fluently.

The localized curriculum serves as an addition rather than a replacement of existing content. For instance, in the first and second grades, local fairy tales and fables are told alongside the tales of Grimm and the fables of La Fontaine. In the third grade, the stories of the Old Testament remain part of the programme, but during the farming and building blocks, children engage in typically Filipino activities such as rice cultivation and traditional building techniques like *sawali* (woven bamboo). In the fourth grade, local mythology – such as the oral epic *Sugidanon* from Panay – is introduced alongside the customary Norse mythology of that year, and so on.

Across all grades, a subject called *Sining ng Bayan* runs as a continuous thread; it roughly translates as *folk art* or *art of the people*. In this class, students learn about indigenous stories, songs, musical instruments, dances, cuisine, arts, and traditional crafts. The teacher who leads this subject maintains contacts with various ethnic minority groups – partnerships, as she calls them. Sometimes, guest speakers are invited to the classroom, since mere imitation of their traditions would feel disrespectful and risk cultural appropriation; at other times, classes visit these communities (for example, the fifth grade goes on a camp with an Aeta group in the north).

Finding suitable Filipino teaching materials for each grade level is an enormous undertaking, yet the teacher pursues it with great passion. Precisely in this metropolis – where such practices can also feel like an *awkward engagement* – she believes it is vital that pupils remain connected to the wisdom of traditionally living minority groups. I ask her how long she thinks it will take to complete this project. “I don’t know,” she says. And then, laughing: “Probably a lifetime!”

¹ I have shortened, merged, and rewritten parts of the original notes for the sake of readability and length.



Figure 1 | Sisidlan Waldorf School, Metro Manila, 13 February 2020. Classroom at the Sisidlan Waldorf School, with a lesson on Philippine geography.