

Community pantry as a form of Bayanihan in the light of Albert Camus' concept of rebellion

Carl Jayson D. Hernandez – Ivan Efreaim A. Gozum –
Charles Aldrin A. Delgado

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Abstract

Filipinos are known for their traditional value called bayanihan. Bayanihan is a deeply embedded Filipino cultural idea symbolizing social solidarity and collaboration. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Filipinos created community pantries as a support system. This paper aims to analyze the idea of community pantry as a form of bayanihan through the Camusian perspective. The paper has three main parts. First, we will discuss the community pantry as a new form of bayanihan. This traditional value has been culturally passed to Filipinos and continues to live on as an identifier of the nation's resiliency. Second, we will discuss Albert Camus' concept of rebellion. Camus introduces the concept of the meridian, wherein one finds a sense of moderation in sharing the world's struggle with their fellowmen. Third, we will attempt to reconcile Camus' notion of rebellion and how the community pantries can be understood as a form of bayanihan. Hence, we propose that the meridian is present in the phenomenon of the community pantries as it manifests bayanihan as an act that shares Filipinos' struggle during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key words: Albert Camus, Bayanihan, community pantry, moderation, rebellion

Introduction

The year 2020 guarantees its place in history books as it narrates the variety of human experiences during the emergence of the COVID-19 Pandemic. The panacea for its medical repercussions indeed came to our aid to restore the order there was once more. Though it may have drastically changed, we have regained a sense of freedom compared to the medical state of affairs years back. Rules about using face masks are now abolished, unlike before when it could even lead to the public's arrest. Aside from the scientific and medical predicaments that surfaced, conflicts within the realm of *being human* have become an issue during the worldwide catastrophe. Questions about the self, the nature of reality, and even socio-political affairs called us to seek solutions for such inquiries. As the world was bound to embrace the mysteries the pandemic was about to bring, each country was left to resolve matters by enforcing rules and regulations.

The intensity of the imposed lockdowns because of the unending extensions of the community quarantine resulted in the country's economic collapse. Mendoza (2021) states that one of the reasons the economy faltered is how it is built on the mobility of people. Because of the rules imposed during those times, various business establishments discontinued their operations. In effect, Filipinos had to find another source of income to alleviate the economic consequences, such as starting online small businesses. This paved the way for families to survive the uncertain days ahead of the pandemic as it became an alternate source of income. According to Monzon (2023), about four in ten Filipinos established their own business during the lockdown period. Aside from the determination of those who started their businesses, part of the success is owed to the patronage of their co-Filipinos for the products and services they offer. This transaction alludes to the Filipino concept of *bayanihan*, built upon the premise that Filipinos would never let their *kababayan* (co-Filipinos) down. One

of the popular movements of *bayanihan* during the pandemic was the emergence of community pantries that follows the general guideline of *magbigay ayon sa kakayahan, kumuha ayon sa pangangailangan*. (Give according to what you can and take according to what you need). The community pantry became not just a symbol of sustenance during the dark times but a reminder that there is hope that can be found in the Filipino spirit of *bayanihan*.

This paper aims to analyze the idea of the community pantry as a form of *bayanihan* through the Camusian perspective. The paper will have three parts. First, we will discuss the community pantry as a new form of *bayanihan*. This traditional value has been culturally passed to Filipinos and continues to live on as an identifier of the nation's resiliency. Second, we will discuss Albert Camus' concept of rebellion. Camus introduces the concept of the meridian, wherein one finds a sense of moderation in sharing the world's struggle with their fellowmen. Third, we will attempt to reconcile Camus' notion of rebellion and how the community pantries can be understood as a form of *bayanihan*. Hence, we propose that the meridian is present in the phenomenon of the community pantries as it manifests *bayanihan* as an act that shares the struggle Filipinos faced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Filipino Concept of Bayanihan and Community Pantries during the pandemic

Filipinos are known for their traditional value called *bayanihan*. *Bayanihan* is a deeply embedded Filipino cultural idea that symbolizes social solidarity and collaboration. It refers to the practice of individuals banding together as a community to assist one another, especially during times of need or adversity (Farolan, 2013). Bankoff (2020) states, "In times of trouble, Filipinos traditionally turn to one another for help. This form of community assistance is popularly known as *bayanihan*. Historically, Filipinos have met the challenges of life in their perilous homeland, whether it be from natural or human causation, by working together." The term "*bayanihan*" comes from the Filipino word "*bayani*," which means "hero" or "someone who performs acts of bravery and selflessness" (Farolan, 2013). To explain this concept, Bersamira and Macaraeg (2022) elaborate:

In Filipino culture, the social value of *bayanihan* (spirit of civic unity and cooperation) is often depicted by a community coming together to physically lift and move a *bahay kubo*, a traditional Filipino home, from one place to another. This Filipino cultural value is seen throughout history, such as through community action to address the impacts of natural disasters, Filipino migrant labor strikes in Hawaii and California to improve work conditions, and in the 1986 People Power Revolution against a Philippine dictatorial regime. The *bayanihan* spirit is a way for Filipinos to share their individual strengths, abilities, and knowledge for the betterment of the collective, a necessary approach in harrowing times.

The idea of *bayanihan* originated in rural areas in the Philippines, when neighbors would assist one another in relocating their homes or repairing the damage inflicted by natural calamities (Farolan, 2013). However, it has expanded beyond its original setting to include diverse forms of collective action, such as fundraising for medical expenditures, volunteering in community initiatives, and providing assistance during times of crisis (Gonzales, 2020). The response of Filipinos to the damage caused by Typhoon Haiyan (known locally as Typhoon Yolanda) in 2013 is one example of *bayanihan* in action (Farolan, 2013). The typhoon, one of the most powerful ever recorded, destroyed numerous provinces in the central Philippines, causing significant destruction and loss of life. Following the disaster, Filipinos from all walks of life, both at home and abroad, banded together to provide relief and support to the afflicted

areas. This collaborative response demonstrated the Filipino people's resilience and solidarity (Salvador et al., 1997).

Another significant example is the COVID-19 pandemic response. Individuals, organizations, and corporations in the Philippines displayed bayanihan by organizing resources and launching numerous projects to assist people in need (del Castillo & Perdidio, 2022). Mutual aid organizations were formed to send food and supplies to needy regions, and online fundraising initiatives were launched to support those who had lost their jobs. Furthermore, medical professionals contributed their knowledge and time to assist overburdened healthcare systems (Bersamira & Macaraeg, 2022). The concept of bayanihan is strongly ingrained in Filipino culture, and the government recognizes its significance. The Philippine government implemented the Bayanihan to Heal as One Act in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (Presidential Communications Operations Office, 2020). The legislation aimed to offer emergency financial aid, promote healthcare programs, and guarantee that affected individuals and communities had access to essential necessities (Republic of the Philippines, 2020).

In addition, bayanihan is experienced in the country during the pandemic through the community pantries. The Philippine government's handling of the epidemic is reflected in the country's economic imbalance. During the early months of the lockdown, the government implemented a Social Amelioration Program (SAP) that provided ayuda (financial support) to the country's most vulnerable citizens (Gozum et al., 2021). However, accusations from various residents occurred during the distribution of financial support, claiming that there is an unequal distribution due to some corrupt politicians (The Tribune Admin, 2020). Because of a second rise of COVID-19 cases, the government implemented lockdowns in early April 2021. However, due to a lack of financing, the SAP was not a viable alternative this time. Furthermore, no government involvement to alleviate the financial hardships of the most vulnerable people could be detected. Because of these circumstances, community pantries were developed. Community pantries are the outcome of concerned citizens' efforts to address people's basic necessities (Suazo, 2021).

The fundamental idea behind these pantries is to encourage individuals to give whatever they can and just take what they need from the pantry. People's material problems have been alleviated by community pantries (Gozum et al., 2021). The concept of a community pantry demonstrates that the virtue of solidarity can be our ally in surviving this pandemic (Galang et al., 2021). However, solidarity and the effectiveness of community pantries can only be realized if people become conscious of what they take from the pantry. Not only should mindfulness be practiced to reduce vaccine hesitancy, but it should also be seen in people's efforts to survive the pandemic's impacts (Capulong, 2021).

In this regard, the emergence of community pantries is a modern incarnation of Bayanihan. Following the economic hardships brought on by the COVID-19 outbreak, Filipinos have launched grassroots projects to distribute critical supplies to those in need. Community pantries embody the Bayanihan ethos by illustrating how community action can address critical social concerns (Gutierrez, 2021). The practice of bayanihan emphasizes the Filipino cultural ideals of compassion, empathy, and unity (Robredo et al., 2023). It illustrates the resiliency of the Filipino people and their determination to work together for the greater good. Filipinos exhibit their belief in collective responsibility and the potential of communal action through bayanihan. To deepen our understanding of community pantry as a form of bayanihan, a philosophical lens is apt to see how such practices lead to human solidarity via following rebellious impulses (*a la Camus*).

Albert Camus' Concept of Rebellion

In this section, we begin with the myth of Prometheus, which illustrates an archetypal figure that represents the typical dynamics of rebellion. Then, we expound further on the three levels of rebellion: metaphysical, historical, and creative. Philippine-based examples, specifically how Rizal embodies the rebellious spirit, elucidate the ideas and bring them closer to Filipino readers. Lastly, we end the section with the concept of the meridian that prevents rebellions from turning into self-defeating revolutions.

Myth of Prometheus

For the brevity of discussion, the myth of Prometheus is derived from the Greek tragedy "Prometheus Bound," presumed to be part of a trilogy, with its authorship often attributed to Aeschylus. The play follows Titan Prometheus, a former ally of Zeus, who is punished for stealing fire and gifting them to mortals. The setting begins in the isolated northern region of Scythia. Hephaestus, accompanied by Power and Force, is forced to bind Prometheus to a boulder with bronze chains into an upright, unsleeping position. Power keeps on commanding Hephaestus while Hephaestus unwillingly follows. After being left alone, Prometheus cries out for nature to witness his sufferings. In turn, the Chorus, Ocean's daughters, came. Through their conversations, Prometheus reveals a foreknowledge that Zeus will need him and foretells the downfall of Zeus. He still believes that if Zeus' anger subsides, they will be joined in friendship again.

The Chorus urges Prometheus to confess what led to such punishment, and the latter consents and narrates the story. Prometheus warned the Titans about the need for schemes, but their naivete persisted. Learning from his mother, Themis, Prometheus understood the power of trickery. He and his mother sided with Zeus instead of his fellow Titans because he failed to convince them. When Zeus became successful in usurping the throne, he bestowed gifts to each god. However, Zeus did not care about the mortals and wanted to annihilate them and replace them with a different existence. Prometheus admits that he is the only one who resisted this plan. He gave mortals gifts, including "blind hopes to settle their hearts" and blazing fire from which they could discover many arts (Aeschylus, 2012: 14).

The conversation between Prometheus and the Chorus continued. Ocean, riding a winged creature, eventually came and even offered Prometheus a piece of advice. "Get to know yourself. Change your ways for new ones" (Aeschylus, 2012: 17). In turn, Ocean wants to request Zeus to set Prometheus free. However, Prometheus dissuades Ocean, for his efforts will only be futile and may even spread misfortune to himself. Eventually, Ocean is convinced and sees that the unjust punishment is not a total loss, admitting: "Your fate's an education, Prometheus" (Aeschylus, 2012: 21). In the departure of Ocean, the Chorus continues to languish over Zeus' form of leadership. Then, Prometheus recalls all the advancements his gifts benefited humanity. Prometheus continues to guard his foreknowledge about Zeus' fate in their conversations.

Then, Io came into the scene. She is a young woman who was transformed into a cow because of Hera's hate. Her movements reflect her weariness and uncertainty from the unsettling pursuit of the now-dead Argus. Prometheus confides to the woman that he knows about her misfortune and her love for Zeus. Intrigued by this, Io asks about his identity, and Prometheus introduces himself as the one who gave humans fire. They converse, and Prometheus grants Io's request about her fortune. Prometheus tells Io's future and past wanderings in a series of speeches. Io knowing her fate asks: "What good is living? Why not throw myself at once from this hard rock, plunge to the ground, and escape my struggles? Better to die and be done than suffer wretchedly through all my days" (Aeschylus, 2012: 36). Prometheus admits that death is a

possible escape for her, while for him, that is impossible since he is immortal. Still, their conversation turned to Prometheus' different prophecies concerning the fall of Zeus and his eventual freedom. Io, feeling her pain, leaves Prometheus. Then, Hermes, the messenger of Zeus, intrudes.

Hermes demands that Prometheus disclose the name of what would lead to Zeus' downfall. Prometheus refuses Hermes and suggests he return instead. Hermes reproaches Prometheus for being excessively stubborn. Prometheus counters each reproach with direct insults or irony. Hermes threatens Prometheus' non-compliance with a storm that will cast him into Tartarus. Then Prometheus will emerge only to have an eagle devour his liver every day, and this will not cease until a god proves willing to descend to Tartarus for him. The Chorus counsels Prometheus to comply, but he does not dread his fate. Hermes asks the Chorus to depart, but they pledge to remain with Prometheus. When Hermes leaves, Prometheus invokes the natural elements to witness how he unjustly suffers.

Camus (1991: 120) reminds us that "myths are made for the imagination to breathe life into them." From this myth, what is elaborated is how Camus uses the figure of Prometheus to show his likeness to his society and what they should learn from the portrayed drama. Camus (1956) observes that during his time, three Promethean characteristics persist, resistance against death, Messianism, and philanthropy. In the inheritance that we have gotten from Prometheus, Camus (1970) believes that modern man has cherished technology but neglected art. In the resistance against death, people have been preoccupied with sustaining the body, thinking that the body needs liberation before the mind. This extreme disposition may even lead people to intentionally liberate the body at the expense of their mind's temporary death. However, mind and body must be simultaneously liberated, lest we become mere slaves again (Camus, 1970). If worse comes to worse and one has to choose between bread and heather, Camus (1970) opines that if bread is truly more necessary, we must learn how to keep the memory of heather alive. In other words, we may temporarily compromise to a certain extent, but we must preserve the ideals worth pursuing.

In elucidating the ideals that human beings should learn, Camus admits the significant role of messianism. It refers to the dynamics of instilling blind hopes into human beings' minds. In *The Rebel*, Camus admits that different forms of Messianism have shaped the trajectory of history. For example, Karl Marx integrated a "Utopian Messianism of highly dubious value" in his doctrines (Camus, 1956: 188). Consequently, his philosophy molded the minds of different generations, becoming an inspiration for transformations that generated both good and bad outcomes. From this phenomenon, one can infer the chain reaction one's way of life, thoughts, and actions can create. Thus, humanity should be careful about what form of messianism is being proliferated, which explains why messianism remains questionable whether it is worth emulating or cultivating.

Philanthropy seems to be the ideal rationale for messianism for its forms to avoid becoming ideologies of oppression. Like Prometheus, individuals should be mindful of how their actions affect humankind and strive to act for their betterment. From this idea, a question arises: "How can humanity resurrect the ideals of Prometheus, the rebel, once again?"

Camus (1956) implicitly hopes that humanity imitates the Greeks' forgiving nature and moderation. Camus underscores the fallibility of human beings, even of the most well-meaning actions. Thus, overcoming the vindictive cycle requires pardon and the practice of moderation. Moderation is a holistic discipline that avoids extreme thoughts and actions by recognizing limits that should not be transgressed. This way of life requires daily effort, which in turn makes suffering bearable and meaningful.

Inspired by this idea, Camus distinguishes three levels of rebellion: metaphysical, historical, and creative.

Metaphysical Rebellion

In every rebellion, there is always a simultaneous negation and affirmation. It is always rooted in affirming a value judgment that should not be transgressed and a negation that defies the existing injustices. Looking specifically at metaphysical revolt, the term metaphysical hinges on its encompassing scope, i.e., human ends and creation (Camus, 1956). In other words, a metaphysical rebel defies his/her unjust human condition and the evils present in creation.

To illustrate this type of rebellion, Camus traced different movements (Dadaism, Gnosticism, etc.) that defied the unjust order and attempted to establish their own justice. In doing so, the metaphysical rebel insinuates and demands deities and fate, taking responsibility into their own hands. In the Philippines, the same idea can be seen in the controversial religious idea of Jose Rizal. In analyzing the correspondence between Rizal and Fr. Pastell, Rolando Gripaldo (2002) synthesized Rizal's religious philosophy, specifically his view on God and His creation. According to Gripaldo (2002), Rizal's view combines agnosticism and deism. The latter postulates that God created the world perfectly and requires no divine intervention to work properly. At the same time, the former accepts the limits of reason to know definitively whether there is a God. Though these two ideas may seem contradictory, the spirit of metaphysical revolt remains, i.e., the responsibility shouldered by human beings instead of assigning them to a deity.

Historical Rebellion

Historical rebellion can be defined as the subversion that defies a power relation as it is rooted in a specific historical context. If metaphysical revolt led to usurping the throne of God, what or who replaces the source of freedom and power? By analyzing historical revolutions (regicides, deicides, etc.), Camus concludes that humankind has deified different forces such as State, Terror, and History instead. Thus, the historical revolution is rooted in its rebellious spirit to create *unity* but develops *totality* instead (Camus, 1956). In other words, the historical rebel aspires to destroy tyranny but replaces only tyrants with another oppressive figure or form.

This idea aligns with Rizal's ideals, which demonstrates his hesitation regarding the use of violence in opposing the unjust systems of the Spanish colonizers. This hesitation is rooted in his awareness of revolutions, specifically of the Jacobin Terror, and how historical rebellions degraded into bloody revolutions. Thus, "Rizal was not one to advocate violence simply because it was the more drastic option. Rather, he asked under what conditions a revolution would lead to a liberal republic" (Claudio, 2019: 30). In this way, Rizal proposed reform instead of revolt and used different means to advance this ideal, including creative rebellion.

Creative Rebellion

In *The Rebel*, Camus places a significant role to art in the act of rebellion. In the fourth chapter, entitled "Rebellion and Art," Camus describes the two sides of art: exaltation and negation. These two sides reflect the pure state of rebellion directed at the world. Camus (1956: 253) writes: "Artistic creation is a demand for unity and a rejection of the world. But it rejects the world on account of what it lacks and in the name of what it sometimes is." The *lack* mentioned in this passage refers to the lack of justice in the current system, and *what reality has* refers to the beauty humanity demonstrates from time to time. In other words, the creative act mirrors the aspirations of the rebellious spirit. In this way, creative rebellion can be defined as

creative engagement with art to maintain the rebellious spirit that aspires to affirm the beauty of humanity and reform oppressive systems and unjust individuals or societies. An example of creative rebellion is Jose Rizal's literary endeavors, most notably his novels *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*. In those novels, Rizal reflects on the predicaments the Philippines confronted during the Spanish colonization. Addressing different audiences, Rizal debunks myths concerning Filipinos, such as being *indios* (unintelligent) and lazy. At the same time, he offers a vision through his novels of a national community. In this way, Rizal shares a perspective about a possible reformation of the Filipino community through their active participation via political action (Claudio, 2019). His novels effectively used creative style to exhort his compatriots, akin to the Camusian creative, rebellious spirit.

Living at the Meridian: Fanning the Promethean Spirit Alive

In the emancipatory project, human beings often make sacrifices and compromises. Frequently, the philanthropic concerns that sparked the rebellious impulse teeter into a revolution that betrays its own origin. Thus, Camus distinguishes between rebellion and revolution. The latter is a grotesque form of the former, which had forgotten its ideals because of a series of compromises. In the end, the happiness it desires becomes transformed as well. Camus (1956: 248) eloquently expresses this: "Those who weep for the happy periods they encounter in history acknowledge what they want: not the alleviation but the silencing of misery." Rebels, consumed by nihilistic worldviews, are transformed into revolutionaries. They seek comfort by replacing oppressors with themselves. To avoid becoming self-defeating revolutionaries, Camus suggests that meridian is practiced.

Thoughts, acts, and feelings at the meridian mark the Camusian moderation that trims the excesses of the contemporary world. A rebel must continuously aspire for a middle way that maintains solidarity with the community of human beings. In *The Rebel*, Camus (1956: 301) writes:

Moderation is not the opposite of rebellion. Rebellion in itself is moderation, and it demands, defends, and re-creates it throughout history and its eternal disturbances. The very origin of this value guarantees us that it can only be partially destroyed. Moderation, born of rebellion, can only live by rebellion. It is a perpetual conflict, continually created and mastered by the intelligence.

This passage points out that keeping the Promethean spirit alive requires a daily effort of self-mastery and a way of living that respects limits regarding our fellow human beings recurring in history. Thus, Camus' philosophy reminds us that fanning the spirit of rebellion at the meridian is a communal effort rooted in philanthropic concerns. The next section juxtaposes bayanihan, Camus' concept of rebellion, and community pantries to synthesize the previous discussions.

Bayanihan, Rebellion, and Community Pantries

Bayanihan, stemming primarily from Philippine culture, aligns with the three ideals of the Camusian concept of rebellion. It provides concrete steps to resist death, proliferates a Messianism (an ideology that may be handed down to current and succeeding generations), and remains rooted in philanthropic concerns. The three levels are highlighted in analyzing Bayanihan through the lens of the Camusian rebellion.

Metaphysically, bayanihan is a way of affirming one's existence and dignity in the face of absurdity and death. By helping others and sharing resources, bayanihan rebels against the meaninglessness and injustice of suffering. Rooted in human dignity, participants strive to reach *kapatiran* or human solidarity.

At the historical level of rebellion, bayanihan is a way of creating solidarity and collective action among people who share a common struggle or goal. By working together and supporting each other, bayanihan rebels against the oppression and domination of external forces (both natural and human-made disasters).

Artistically, bayanihan is a way of expressing one's creativity and values through concrete actions. By transforming the environment and social relations, bayanihan rebels against the conformity and stagnation of the status quo. Thus, innovative forms of expressing goodwill, creating effective archetypes for the betterment of human well-being, and inspiration spring from both individual and collective actions.

Clearly, then, bayanihan aligns with the Camusian rebellion. To further illustrate this, examples of bayanihan are expounded. Two famous examples of bayanihan are (1) the proactive act of *lipat-bahay*, or the community's collaborative effort to relocate huts, and (2) *lusong*, or a colloquial term that pertains to a social agreement that people are invited to help with a task with no formal compensation.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a new form of bayanihan emerged, i.e., community pantries. Community pantries began as an initiative that effectively became a system fortifying community resilience. Individuals may donate and take whatever material goods they need or desire. Spurred by different motivations, this practice saved people from hunger and other suffering. However, like all rebellious acts, the community pantry requires moderation from its participants to remain effective and self-sustaining.

Conclusion

The Filipino value of *bayanihan* has been a withstanding characteristic of Filipinos, enabling them to conquer challenges while being grounded in solidarity. As a community, Filipinos are known to be resilient because of their unwavering spirit to lift each other in times of crisis. In the Camusian perspective, the concept *bayanihan* alludes to the idea of rebellion—a practice of moderation where people collectively combat the cruelty of the world in order to find meaning. The community pantry rippled during its emergence as barangays, parishes, and other forms of community emulated its framework to deliver sustenance to people when Filipinos faced the hardships that the pandemic induced. Reconciling it with Camus' idea of the meridian or moderation, it is evident that the Filipinos, through the community pantries, revitalized *bayanihan*. Aside from the popular example of *bayanihan* where Filipinos altogether transfer a hut from one place to another, and the idea of *lusong* where Filipinos willfully offer their hand without expecting any form of compensation, the community pantry is one of the newest forms of *bayanihan*. Looking back at the past few years, through the openness to give without expecting something to return and to gather supplies only in accordance with what is needed, Filipinos have rebelled together against the crisis. The spirit of *bayanihan* continues to transcend time and space as the Filipino continues to live at the meridian.

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Carl Jayson D. Hernandez, MA
Department of Philosophy, School of Humanities,
Ateneo de Manila University,
Katipunan Avenue, Loyola Heights,
Quezon City, Philippines
cjhernandez@ateneo.edu
Graduate School, University of Santo Tomas,
Sampaloc, Manila,
Philippines
carljayson.hernandez.gs@ust.edu.ph
ORCID ID: 0000-0003-3818-0978

Ivan Efreaim A. Gozum, MA
Institute of Religion,
University of Santo Tomas,
Sampaloc,
Manila, Philippines
iagogzum@ust.edu.ph
Graduate School
University of Santo Tomas,
Sampaloc, Manila
Philippines
ivanefreaim.gozum.gs@ust.edu.ph
ORCID ID: 0000-0001-5085-2752

Charles Aldrin A. Delgado
FEU High School
Sampaloc, Manila, Philippines

cadelgado@feuhighschool.edu.ph
University of Santo Tomas,
Graduate School,
Sampaloc, Manila,
Philippines
charlesaldrin.delgado.gs@ust.edu.ph
ORCID: 0009-0000-7371-0052