

Weaving Memory, Weaving Family: Familism, Continuing Bonds, and Material Heritage in Francisco Arcellana's *The Mats*

Mika Joy Gonzalez¹, Chalsea Rhian Sumaoang¹, Beverly Vertudez¹, Frances Glendawn Visaya¹ & Mark Kevin Astrero¹

¹ Northeastern College, Santiago, Philippines

Correspondence: Mark Kevin Astrero, Northeastern College, Santiago, Philippines.

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Abstract

In this paper, the author focuses on the Reading of Francisco Arcellana's story *The Mats* (1938) as an expression of Filipino familism, ancestral memory, and the significance of material objects in the family's everyday life. Drawing on scholarship in Filipino cultural psychology, the sociology of grief, and material culture analysis, the author argues that the sleeping mats given to family members by Mr. Jaime Angeles serve as both heirlooms passed down from one generation to another and a means of establishing relationships with the deceased. Looking through Arcellana's story, the author shows that it portrays Filipino culture as one based on the importance of family ties, highlighting the process of maintaining family connections through naming, gifting, and creating, which functions as a classic example of an early Philippine short story in English.

Keywords: Francisco Arcellana, *The Mats*, Filipino familism, continuing bonds, material culture, utang na loob, Philippine literature

1. Introduction

Francisco Arcellana's short story *The Mats* was published in 1938 and has been read well into the decades after World War II. It tells the story of a father bringing home mats, properly woven for each member of his family. What at first appears to be a cheerful story turns out to be a very grim one as soon as the readers learn about three more mats that symbolize the couple's three children who died when they were infants. This article argues that the story cannot be viewed merely as a depiction of Filipino family ties but must be understood as a dramatization of several relevant cultural processes. These processes include familism as the leading principle of social life, the practice of maintaining ties with the dead, the customs concerning relics, and the rule associated with Filipino psychology, known as *utang na loob*.

The story's enduring significance lies in how it anticipates ideas that later became established in the field of social science, which in the short story manifest as the ritual of unfurling mats and uttering names. At the same time, cultural psychologists will later call this familism (Choi, Kim, & Noh, 2017) and *kapwa* (David, Sharma, & Petalio, 2017). In contrast, researchers of grief will describe the family's insistence on including the dead in the count of the living as a case of continuing bonds (Rothaupt & Becker, 2007). The present paper brings together the two bodies of literature. It demonstrates how a story about a mundane household object contains a coherent, culturally specific theory of families, memory, and mourning.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Filipino Familism and Kapwa in Cultural Context

Familism, which broadly refers to a cultural trait promoting family loyalty, unity, and interdependence over individualistic values, is said to play an important role in the social life of Filipinos. Indeed, Choi, Kim, and Noh (2017) found that Filipinos in the U.S. practice familism more than Korean Americans do, as they instill these

values in their children. David, Sharma, and Petalio (2017) connect this idea to the broader Filipino notion of *kapwa*, which refers to the relational and shared identity where the self is intertwined with others, especially the family; they also remind us that colonial history has placed pressure on *kapwa*, making its active practice a cultural necessity rather than a passive inheritance. Alampay (2024) adds to this story by presenting evidence that scores of Filipino parents hold collectivist beliefs and show high expectations from their family and high levels of warmth toward their children, thus, indicating that familism is not only an abstract concept but also a real experience that shapes everyday lives of families, which is displayed by Mr. Jaime Angeles's efforts in providing individualized presents to his children.

2.2 Continuing Bonds: Grief, Memory, and the Presence of the Dead

The second category of literature, situated within the domain of bereavement psychology, has a terminology that can help comprehend the methods families like the Angeles keep their deceased family members alive in their everyday lives. Rothaupt and Becker (2007) note the change in the Western bereavement paradigm from the previous approaches which equated grief with the removal of the deceased from family context to the contemporary 'continuing bonds' paradigm, where keeping up the relationship with a deceased person is considered a normal and often healthy part of the grieving process. Millar and Lopez-Cantoro (2022) take this concept further, arguing that it can be said that love for the deceased is conserved differently than it may have used to be and that the people who suffer the loss also retain the power of affecting the memory of the deceased even though at a particular point in time the quality of the relationship changes.

Sękowski (2021) also distinguishes between concrete and symbolic manifestations of continuing bonds, noting that concrete manifestations are associated with unresolved mourning. In contrast, symbolic manifestations, such as rituals, objects, and practices of remembrance, are more likely to reflect effective mourning. This is an important distinction in interpreting the mats of Mr. Jaime Angeles, as they can be read as a symbolic, continuing bond representing a non-pathological, ritualized way of keeping the memory of Josefina, Victoria, and Concepcion alive.

2.3 Heirlooms and Memory Objects: Material Culture as Vessel of Family History

Scholarly work on material culture and consumer research shows why an ordinary object like a woven mat evokes such strong emotions and carries cultural implications. Türe and Ger (2016) characterize heirlooms as expressions of familial identity and continuity, arguing that such objects serve as "anchors of rootedness" because they are regarded as enduring, changing little from generation to generation. Marschall (2019) reaches a similar conclusion that utilitarian objects, especially those given as gifts, often develop into "memory objects" over time, collecting emotional values due to repeated use and acts, rather than their financial attributes, which reflects the story's description about Jaime and Emilia's wedding mat that was only used during the wedding and afterward only for some other desired occasions.

According to Bronec (2019), who investigated how memory is passed down through heirlooms from one generation to another after war, these objects yield the same results regardless of each family's historical context, as heirlooms' importance lies not in their material side but in the events and relationships they evoke. Overall, based on this literature, we can say that the role of the *banig* in Arcellana's story seems to be more than just a detail of local character.

2.4 Paternal Authority and Gift-Giving as Reciprocity (Utang na Loob) in the Filipino Family

Research on the Filipino family context and network suggests that Mr. Jaime Angeles is a unique figure who serves as the principal provider and distributor of the mats. In their studies, Harper (2009) and Jocson (2020) suggest that the father plays an important role in the family, even though he holds formal authority over the household. Alampay (2024) stresses that fathers in the Philippines are still perceived as the heads of families.

The concept of "utang na loob" is defined by the related literature on cultural gift-giving, and the term literally translates to "debt of the heart" (Rungduin et al., 2015). Utang na loob is described by Gavino et al. (2023) as not merely gratitude, but rather a social bond resulting from the expression of care by one person to another. Maido (2022) uses a Bourdieusian lens to demonstrate that utang na loob can function as a form of "symbolic capital," helping to solidify social networks of trust. Viewed through the lens of such literature, one can interpret Mr. Jaime Angeles's mats not as mere gifts, but as a means of establishing or maintaining family connections with loved ones, or with deceased daughters in particular.

3. Methodology

The research employed a qualitative analysis of *The Mats* by Arcellana, based on four cultural interpretative terms identified in the earlier part of this paper: familism, continuing bonds, material heritage, and reciprocal gift-giving (*utang na loob*). The narrative has been analyzed based on notions of family reunion and hierarchy, the elaboration on the dead children, the description of the mats (their origin, craftsmanship, and application),

and gift-giving. These textual observations have been decoded using the cultural vocabulary of Filipino cultural psychology (familyism, *kapwa*, *utang na loob*), sociology and philosophy of grief (continuing bonds), and material culture.

4. Historical and Cultural Context

The setting of *The Mats* is a Filipino household in the early twentieth century, highlighting that, in a family, the focus now centers on the family unit rather than on the individual as the primary social and emotional unit of our lives at the time. Family traditions and practices at that time revolved around the obedient relationship children had with their parents and the value of generational continuity and the preservation of family material possessions, which can be linked to findings from later research (Choi, Kim, & Noh, 2017). The reality of sick relatives and child loss, which are mentioned directly in the family story about the suffering of a family long ago, were common for that time, so preserving the memory of a dead child became a normal thing to do culturally.

The *banig* is part of a wider Filipino tradition of handmade craftsmanship, in which items are ordered from local artisans rather than bought, a preference the narrator cites as being typical of Papa's attitude to gift-giving, showing the importance of handmade over mass-produced items. This historical context, including close-knit families, high death rates, and a craft economy in which items were created specifically for their owners, could be regarded as the soil from which the story's main symbol derives its full cultural significance.

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1 *The Banig as Heirloom and Memory Object*

This narrative puts forward two distinct sorts of mat: the traditional marriage mat and the newly created family mats, which function based on the principles of heirlooms and memory objects outlined by Türe & Ger (2016) and Marschall (2019). In this way, the old marriage mat, which was used solely in the night of Jaime and Emilia's marriage and preserved only for special occasions, illustrates Türe and Ger's (2016) explanation of the function of an heirloom as a foundation for family identity because its value lies in the fact that it preserves the memory of the beginning of the marriage in time, rather than having any monetary value. The newly created mats serve as a demonstration of Marschall's (2019) explanation of how simple household objects can become memory objects through the intention to create memories about their use.

5.2 *Papa's Authority as Custodian of Family Memory*

Mr. Jaime Angeles occupies a position in his family that conforms to the pattern of behavior demonstrated by Filipino fathers, according to the work of Harper (2009) and Jocson (2020). The comeback he makes at home is described as unforgettable. At the same time, his performance of distributing each mat allows him to play a role in which he turns the abstract concept of family unity into tangible, personalized gestures. Significantly, this role has to do with memory in and of itself in that it is Papa who decides on the provision of mats for the deceased daughters, not to mention the frequent asking of a rhetorical question which implies the idea that he cannot forget them, marks him as the head of the family not only in terms of family unity but also as the keeper of family history.

5.3 *The Mats for the Dead: Continuing Bonds and Familial Grief*

The scene in which Mr. Jaime Angeles discloses the mats intended for Josefina, Victoria, and Concepcion is regarded as the quintessential example of continuing bonds described by bereavement researchers. His handling of his daughters' passing is not about ending relationships, but rather what Millar & Lopez-Cantero (2022) refer to as a changed yet still functioning non-reciprocal connection, maintained through naming, giving gifts, and including them in family ceremonies. Based on Sękowski's distinction (2021) between concrete and symbolic continuing bonds, the mats are symbolic bonds, meaning they do not seek to replace or physically represent deceased daughters but are seen as ritualistic objects through which Papa's family seals the presence of their deceased. The interpretation of this feature is supported by Papa's practice of calling each of his daughters by name during his presentation of the mats, which resembles the naming and remembering practices of Rothaupt & Becker (2007) regarded as essential for proper engagement with continuing bonds.

5.4 *Gift-Giving, Utang na Loob, and the Economy of Familial Love*

Although *utang na loob* is traditionally used to explain acts of service performed by one non-relative to another and by one generation to another based on debts incurred and discharged (Rungduin, Rungduin, & Joshua, 2015; Gavino, Donato, & Panotan, 2023), its principles of reciprocal obligations and rendering gratitude also shed light on the emotional background of Papa's gifting scene. Thus, Maído (2022) points out that '*utang na loob*', analyzed in the light of Bourdieu's approach as a form of symbolic capital establishes social bonds between givers and recipients and makes the practical function of mats much wider than their being bedding: each mat obligates the recipient to recall the sender's contribution and to show the sense of gratitude that comes from the

Filipino culture. Since the same principles can be applied to Papa's daughters, who cannot reciprocate the gift in question, the asymmetry generated by this situation becomes painfully evident: daughters cannot accept or give back any material gifts, but this does not prevent Papa from treating them the way he treats other family members.

6. Conclusion

Through the humble ritual of giving out woven sleeping mats, *The Mats* articulates a clear theory of family: cohesion is actively carried out, grief transforms rather than separates families, and common household items carry memories, gratitude, and belonging. When read in conjunction with scholarship on Filipino familism, kapwa, the psychology and philosophy of continuing bonds, material culture and studies of heirlooms, and the cultural logic of utang na loob, the story's key symbol stands out as a notably complex formulation of the values at the core of Filipino cultural psychology.

Mr. Jaime Angeles's declaration that his late daughters are still present among us and in our hearts is not merely an expression of sentimentality but a valid conception of the lasting-tie model of grief, as demonstrated through the specifically Filipino language of family, craft, and presents. The above interpretation emphasizes Arcellana's story as a meaningful literary work for the understanding of Filipino family life at present, especially considering the importance of diaspora and migration and the changes in family life which affect the way people remember their families and live their lives.

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