- Thought and thinking

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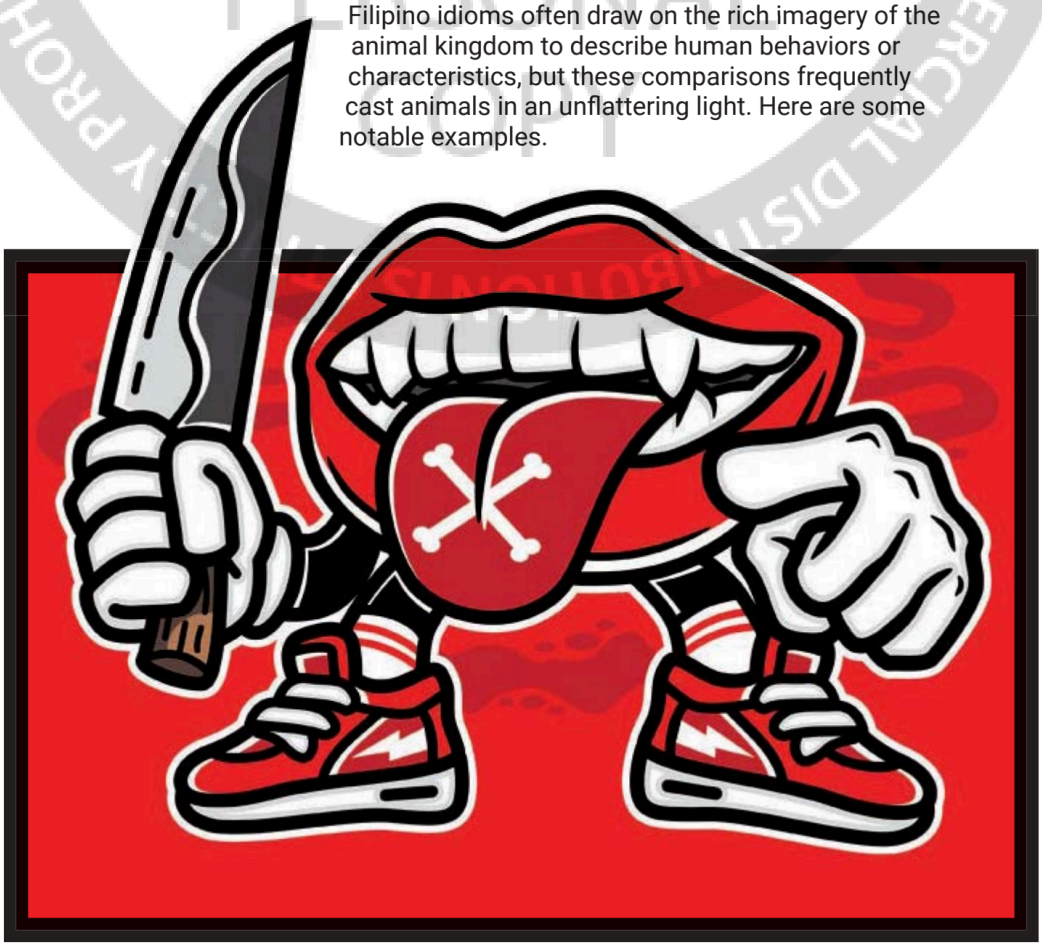
WOUNDING WORDS

RETHINKING ANIMAL STEREOTYPES IN FILIPINO

By CLIFF SAWIT

The Filipino language, a vibrant tapestry of idioms and expressions, mirrors the depth and complexity of its rich culture. But woven into this tapestry are phrases that subtly shape how we perceive our world, especially animals that inhabit it.

Filipino idioms often draw on the rich imagery of the animal kingdom to describe human behaviors or characteristics, but these comparisons frequently cast animals in an unflattering light. Here are some notable examples.



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1 BUWAYA (CROCODILE)

In Filipino culture, the term *"Buwaya"* (Crocodile) is often used metaphorically to describe individuals perceived as greedy or corrupt, especially politicians.

For example, one might say, *"Ang mga Buwaya sa gobyerno ay patuloy na nagnanakaw sa kaban ng bayan."* This translates to, "The Crocodiles in the government continue to steal from the nation's treasury," highlighting the association between Crocodiles and corrupt officials.





2 AHAS (SNAKE)

In Filipino culture, the term *"Ahas"* (Snake) is a metaphor for treachery and deceit. It is often used to describe someone who betrays trust or acts in a duplicitous manner.

One example might be, *"Isa siyang Ahas na kaibigan,"* which translates to, "They are a false friend." This phrase perpetuates the stereotype of Snakes as symbols of betrayal, overshadowing their ecological importance and role in nature.

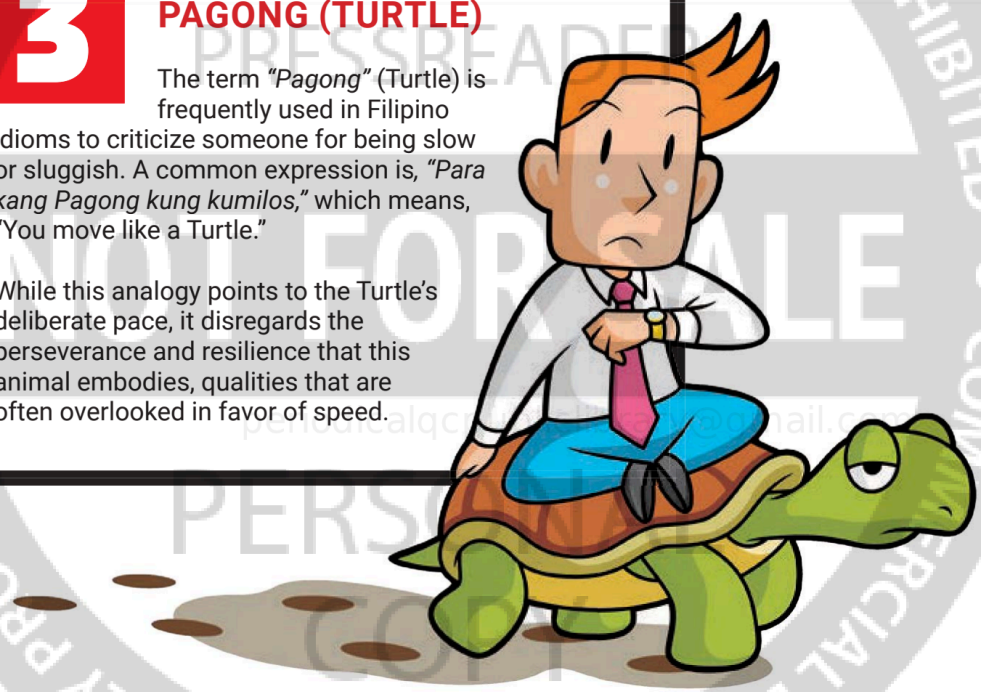
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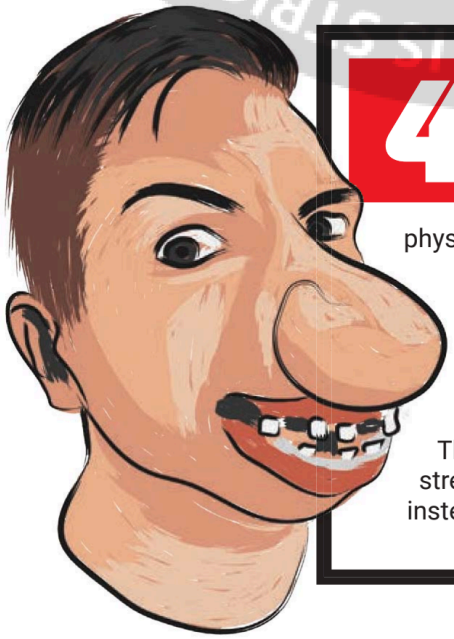
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3 PAGONG (TURTLE)

The term *"Pagong"* (Turtle) is frequently used in Filipino idioms to criticize someone for being slow or sluggish. A common expression is, *"Para kang Pagong kung kumilos,"* which means, "You move like a Turtle."

While this analogy points to the Turtle's deliberate pace, it disregards the perseverance and resilience that this animal embodies, qualities that are often overlooked in favor of speed.





4 KABAYO (HORSE)

In Filipino, *"Kabayo"* (Horse) is sometimes used as an insult regarding someone's physical appearance.

For instance, *"Mukha siyang Kabayo"* translates to, "They look like a Horse," implying unattractive facial features, such as a long face or exposed gums.

This phrase unfairly diminishes the grace and strength for which Horses are renowned, focusing instead on a distorted and derogatory portrayal.

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5 LINTA (LEECH)

In Filipino, *"Linta"* (Leech) is often used metaphorically to describe someone who is overly dependent or exploitative.

A common expression is, *"Parang Linta kung makakapit,"* which translates to, "Clings like a Leech." This idiom draws from the Leech's feeding behavior, portraying the person as someone who attaches themselves to others for personal gain.



However, this comparison overlooks the Leech's ecological significance and their historical contributions to medicine, where Leeches have been used for therapeutic purposes.



6 UNGGOY (MONKEY)

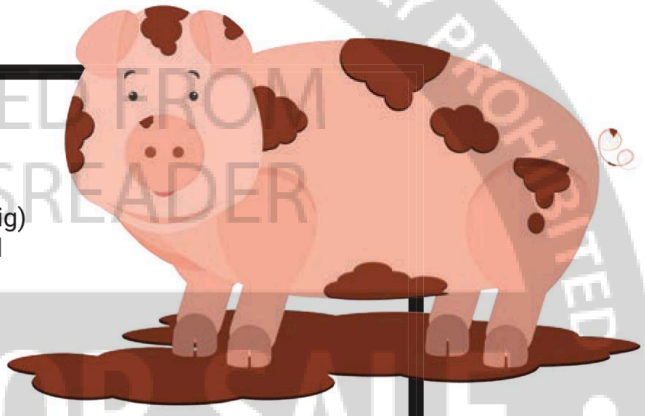
"Unggoy" (Monkey) is a term used in Filipino idioms to describe someone acting foolishly or clumsily.

A common usage might be, *"Tumigil ka nga sa pag-uunggoy mo sa harap ng mga tao,"* which translates to, "Stop acting like a Monkey in front of people." While the idiom seeks to mock certain silly behaviors, it trivializes the remarkable intelligence and social sophistication of Monkeys.

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7 BABOY (PIG)

The word *"Baboy"* (Pig) is often used to label someone as messy or unclean.

For example, one might hear, *"Ang Baboy mo!"* which simply means, "You're such a Pig!"

This phrase stems from the stereotype of Pigs as dirty animals, despite their natural cleanliness and their role as intelligent, social creatures when provided with a suitable environment.

THE SUBTLE HARM OF ANIMAL METAPHORS

While Filipino idioms add vibrancy to our language, many inadvertently cast animals in a negative light by attributing undesirable human traits to them.

For instance, labeling a corrupt individual as a *"Buwaya"* (Crocodile) not only critiques the person but also unfairly brands Crocodiles as inherently greedy. Similarly, calling someone an *"Ahas"* (Snake) to denote deceitfulness perpetuates negative perceptions of Snakes, despite their ecological importance and natural behaviors.

These expressions can shape societal attitudes toward animals, leading to misconceptions and unjust treatment. By consistently associating animals with negative human behaviors, we risk fostering a culture that views these creatures with unwarranted disdain or fear.

Many animals — Crocodiles and Snakes included — have died in the hands of humans who detested or feared them based on how these creatures have always been portrayed.



Lolong, the largest Crocodile held in captivity, didn't have to live — or die — captive. If Crocodiles didn't have the bad rap they have now, would Lolong still be alive? (MartyWilliams | Wikimedia Commons)

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REEVALUATING OUR LANGUAGE

Language shapes perception. The words and expressions we use influence how we view the world and its inhabitants. By rethinking animal-related idioms, we can promote a more accurate and respectful understanding of animals.

Instead of using animals as metaphors for negative traits, we can choose expressions that do not perpetuate harmful stereotypes. For example, rather than saying, *"Buwaya siya"* to describe a greedy person, we could simply call them *"sakim"* (greedy) without involving an animal reference.

Adopting more neutral or positive language when referring to animals can foster a culture of respect and appreciation for the natural world. It encourages us to see animals as they are — complex beings with their own roles in the ecosystem — rather than mere symbols of human flaws.

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?



The Filipino language is rightly celebrated for its rich tapestry of idioms and figures of speech, expressing through words the depth of our culture. However, it's essential to recognize how our words influence how we perceive our animal friends.

Language is a powerful tool that shapes our thoughts, perceptions, and behaviors. The expressions we use daily influence how we view and treat others, including animals. Derogatory idioms that associate animals with negative human traits can lead to misconceptions and unjust treatment of these creatures.

By being mindful of our language, we can challenge and change harmful stereotypes. This shift not only benefits animals but also enriches our culture, promoting values of respect, empathy, and understanding.

In a world where human actions significantly impact the environment and its inhabitants, fostering a language of respect toward animals is a big step toward a more compassionate and sustainable future.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cliff Sawit is a writer and lawyer who shares his home with three beloved Cats: Ezio, Simba, and Mikan. When he's not crafting prose or drafting pleadings, Cliff enjoys spending quality time with his feline companions, who inspire his creativity and provide endless amusement.

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