

PLAYING WITH MONEY, GAMBLING WITH LIFE: MAHJONG AND CARD GAMES IN THE LOOBAN, MLANG, NORTH COTABATO

Maria Stella R. Salazar

The issue of urban poor gambling is one area where an ‘engaged anthropology’ may not necessarily involve supporting the community in their activities but rather the acceptance of such as unique to the culture of the people and working toward a deeper understanding of why such activities continually exist. The gambling practices of a community of urban poor informal settlers in a place called Looban in Mlang, North Cotabato is hereby analyzed in terms of two characteristics of games. The first characteristic is that games are make-believe and the second characteristic is that games have dual functions. Mahjong and card games are locally regarded as a way of ‘passing the time’ (“*dibersyon*”) rather than ‘gambling’: they relieve boredom, promote alertness and to provide a temporary escape from the realities of the present. And while one function of such games is to treat money as a plaything, on the other hand they also teach children to become resourceful and to promote initiative in looking for ways to earn or obtain money. Gambling has not taught them delayed gratification and saving. However, by living minimally, the gamblers are able to set aside a portion of their earnings to specifically budget to fund their playing. With regard to the ability of mahjong games to enhance skill of strategizing, it can be perceived that such exercise in strategy is carried over to real life situations by the urban poor, such as when they use these skills to negotiate for better relocation packages.

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Introduction

The urban poor are often a misunderstood group of people. One of the things they are criticized for is how, despite their destitute state, many of them still manage to engage in gambling. As money is one of the things they do not have in abundance there must be something in these games that makes it

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worthwhile for them to set aside a portion of their earnings to be able to engage in the activity on a regular basis.

A penchant for playing games such as mahjong and card games is shared by several members of the community in an informal settlement in the town of Mlang in North Cotabato. The regularity by which these people play these games amidst hardship and crisis warrants investigation, for such activities do not only affect those involved in playing the games but also the people in their surroundings, making it a public issue in the community. Low and Merry (2010) describe how engaged anthropology should tackle public issues. 'Engagement' by anthropologists in this case need not necessarily entail agreeing with and supporting gambling activity. However, in doing ethnography, to accept who and what they are as a people can perhaps contribute to understanding the urban poor. (And potentially they can also be effectively 'helped' in a manner that is acceptable and appropriate for them.) What can the playing of mahjong and card games in Mlang North Cotabato tell us about their culture?

Games are full of information regarding the culture of its bearers. Huizinga (1955), Caillois (1961) and Sutton-Smith (1997), three of the most influential people in the study of play and games, may have different views of games and playing but all agree in this regard. Huizinga emphasized that play is not merely something you find in culture. Rather, he professes that culture itself bears the character of play. Caillois, on the other hand, sees many of the structures in society as elaborate forms of games and behaviors that can be likened to forms of play. Sutton-Smith (1997), a play theorist, asserts that some of the earlier characteristics of play (that games are an exercise of free choice) may not be true; that play forms are varied and that games have different meanings to different people and therefore the study of games requires a multidisciplinary approach.

Gambling is viewed as *leisure* when the motivation for such activity arises from a consumption rather than an investment point of view (Dzik 2006). Clarke (2008) discovered that motivation for continuous gambling stems from boredom, the need to escape from everyday life as well as for stimulation among older adults. Neal (2005) believes that people who gamble on a regular basis do it for the experience it brings them. Gambling can also be interpreted semiotically in relation to deeper social contests and resistance.¹

¹Geertz' reading of the Balinese cockfight led him to interpret it as 'deep play', as well as performed in resistance to the central government that banned it (Geertz 1973). Sallaz (2008) has looked at the casinos in South Africa as a central piece of

Key to understanding the passion for playing mahjong of the people in Mlang is analyzing the game itself. Two characteristics of games identified by Lopez (2001) are relevant to discovering their importance to the people playing it. According to Lopez, one characteristic of games is that they are *make-believe*. When a player enters the game, real life gets to be suspended and the player behaves according to the rules stipulated in the game. After playing a game, the player continues with his life as it was before he entered the game.² The game does not change his status, position or rank in the community as some ritual practices do in real life. Thus, the practice of suspending real life and entering a make-believe world by playing gambling games can be considered a temporary escape.

The second characteristic of games identified by Lopez is 'dual function'. This characteristic has something to do with games' ability to teach or inculcate desirable social behaviors such as fair play, tolerance, teamwork and other desirable behaviors necessary to win in games while at the same time it also provides players an opportunity to escape from following societal rules which can be engineered inside the games, as players have time and again changed rules to suit their sentiments. Together with fostering desirable social habits, play can do the opposite by providing the player an opportunity to express unbecoming social behaviors, of which aggression and cheating are only two.

In parallel, risk-taking practice or behavior in gambling can find expression in real life as well. Games, due to their expressive nature, are considered mechanisms for displaying culture.³ Games have also been

national economic policy and the government's response to displace illegal forms of gambling. Both (Geertz 1973 and Sallaz 2008) took on the position of the central government as reference to their reading of the actions of the people involved in gambling. Geertz focused on the relationship of the gambler to the cock, while Sallaz took on the point of view of the service providers – the labor force of the casinos and the bureaucracy by which it operated.

²Turner (1974) terms this ritual action as *liminoid* to differentiate it from the real life *liminal* state that persons undergo and which changes the person upon emerging from this state.

³For children, playing games helps them develop social skills necessary for adult life which are symbolically recreated inside the game (Rosenstiel 1979). In some cases, games have been known to develop good values and character traits. Ager (1979) found that traditional hunting complex requiring individual initiative, memory and physical strength fosters values which are expressed in the types of games that are traditionally played by Eskimo children. Peregrine (2008) found that the

examined in terms of their complexity and how they can be compared to society at large. According to Binde (2005) cross-cultural studies suggest that the more complex a society is, the more likely it is that games of strategy are present. This is because games are oftentimes modeled after society. (A perfect example is the creation of the game Monopoly in 1935 in a capitalist society.)⁴ Games can also be seen as *social fictions* which mirror our real lives (Smith 1996). McGurrin, Abt and Smith (1984) find that gambling takes place in peoples' *world of realities* that presents situations relating to perceptions of opportunities, risks, and goals.⁵ The presence of gambling games according to Binde (2005) correlates well with societal complexity resulting in inequalities of the distribution of wealth. Games of pure chance like lotteries are seen as an immediate solution to getting rich the fast and easy way (Brenner, Lipeb & Servet 1996; Go 2003; McMillen & Donnelly 2008). Games involving skill and strategy depend on risk-taking behavior in relation to different people's dispositions to achievement and avoiding failure (Bromiley & Curley 1992).

The material for this article is specific to an urban informal settlement called "Looban" in Poblacion B of the town of Mlang in North Cotabato.⁶ Two houses inside the Looban play host to mahjong and card games played almost every day. Of the approximately thirty to forty households in the Looban, about half patronize these play sites together with other players coming from outside the Looban. The playing of gambling games at these two houses continued even when most of the residents of the Looban had been requested to relocate (to a site over three kilometers away at the outskirts of the more populated area of the town). The aim of this paper is to discuss the role that playing these games may have had in the lives of the

enculturation of obedience in children's games served to maintain socio-political structures.

⁴Ortega-Grimaldo (2008) admits that, much like the monopoly game, his inspiration for his board game called "*Crossing the Bridge*" back in 2001 was very much influenced by his concern about discourses in crossing the border from Mexico to the U.S. The game, as in real life, reflected how it may take the player forever to cross the international line which often resulted in continuous frustrations.

⁵According to Harms (1987) for example, migration patterns of the Nunu tribe of equatorial Africa are actually motivated by what he called social competition wherein the decisions of the people whether to stay or move on depended on their strategies of minimizing loses or maximizing gains. If a Nunu would be inspired to create a game, he will most likely include ideas of strategizing in order to win in the games.

⁶The place was discovered during research for my dissertation on the same topic.

people through the make-believe and dual function characteristics of games. What make-believe feature of the game is carried over to real life situations? What dual functions do playing mahjong and card games develop? The paper aims to discover or interpret the driving forces that urge the gamblers to play these games almost on a daily basis. What do they really get out of playing these games? How can the conduct of the games affect other non-playing members of the community, particularly the children?

Ethnographic fieldwork spanned approximately eight months of participant observation. Interviews were conducted with point persons in the Looban such as the owners of the play sites and frequent patrons of the places whom I became friendly with. Information with regards to the progress of the relocation was mostly taken from the people inside the Looban.⁷

Mahjong and card games at the Looban

A background of the people living in Looban in Mlang is hereby provided. Together with this are descriptions of the two play sites that they call “*pasugalan*” (‘gambling dens’) that regularly play host to these games. They are called as such because gambling games such as mahjong, “*tong-its*” and sometimes “*piat-piat*” or “*pusoy dos*” are regularly played in the place and players are required to pay the “*tong*”, which is a predetermined amount paid to the ‘house’ every time a player wins in a game.

“Looban” (meaning ‘interior’) is an informal name the people of the Poblacion B of Mlang use to refer to a place near the market where informal settlers had built their houses within and surrounding the premises of a former slaughterhouse. Another slaughterhouse had long been constructed at a site about a kilometer away, where operation was transferred in the 1980s. The old building had not been demolished and several families, mostly those working in the slaughterhouse, converted the building into their living areas. Adjacent to this building is one of the main streets of the town proper where provisions for road widening have been considered in the planning of the town. Those whose properties were adjacent to the road utilized the area for their personal use by putting up business establishments. At the back of these business establishments are more houses of informal settlers. The area is contained on the other side by the Mlang river.

⁷Fieldwork was done intermittently mostly on 3-day weekend stints from Friday to Sunday, or longer including holidays whenever possible, from November 2010 to May 2011. Weekday observation was also possible during the summer months.

From the main road one can enter the Looban through a small dirt alley lined with houses facing each other on both sides. Aside from people walking, only bicycles, motorcycles and some small carts can enter the place due to its narrowness. One can easily discern that the people living in the Looban are not affluent. Many of their houses are made of cheap materials with no finishing at all. Many of them do not even have paved floors and their living areas are multi-functional, serving as living room during the day, dining area during meals and bedroom at night. The clothes the people wear are often worn out and faded through many washings, many of them with holes that need mending. But they seem to not mind the state of shabbiness and disrepair. Toddlers usually go around barefoot and sometimes with no undergarments. One house was separated from the footpath by a fence, which was probably done to safeguard the space in front of the house from being occupied when people started to pour in and occupy available vacant spaces.

At the far end of the entrance, on the corner before turning right to go deeper into the Looban, is a public water pump. Residents use this area to wash their clothes and their kitchenware. Many of them, particularly the boys and men, can be seen taking a bath next to this pump. Another pump, similar to this, is located deep into the Looban in a clearing near a mango tree. Somewhere within the former slaughterhouse among the many residents is a public rest room. (I only discovered this rest room after the building had been demolished, leaving the rest room intact for the use of the remaining residents.)

Inside the Looban is a free space where no houses are situated. The space was created when people started building their houses on the sides facing this area. It was left as such because probably nobody would want to have a house built in front of another's and thereby blocking their share of the open space, which was at the same time the way to the Looban's exit. They used this free space to park their motorcycles and carts, hang washed clothes over clotheslines attached to houses on the sides, as playground of young kids, and as an area where they roast pigs (*lechon*) for selling. Others simply make use of the space to walk around and sit on chairs or benches that they usually take out of their houses on hot sunny afternoons.

Most of these informal settlers do not own land nor do they have regular jobs. Some of them work for the slaughterhouse; a number of them make a living as garbage collectors (*bote-dyaryo*); and a few of them accept cooking assignments (e.g. roasting pigs as *lechoneros*), or any odd jobs available. Once in a while, the *lechoneros* would sell a pig they had roasted in the market on Saturdays (market day). Most women can be seen at home but a

number of them work as collectors for the popular local lotteries of “*Last two*” and “*Ez2*.” They can also be called upon for home service manicure and pedicure jobs. Some have managed to earn from home by cooking and selling “*banana-que*” (deep fried bananas cooked with brown sugar and skewered with bamboo sticks). Almost all those present while games are in progress get to buy the banana-que. This arrangement makes it easy for the seller to dispose of the goods. Once in a while a vendor of peanuts or other foodstuff would also wander into the playing area in the hopes of making a sale. Those with little children can be seen visiting their neighbors sitting around talking or watching mahjong or card games played in the open.

Within the Looban the two houses that have play sites or “*pasugalan*” are called as such because almost everyday games of mahjong and cards are played with money as bets. One *pasugalan* made use of a part of their house as playing space. The other *pasugalan* is situated outside the house underneath a temporary structure they call a *kamalig*, beside the shade of a big tree. The *pasugalan* inside the house accepts customers any time of the day (beginning at 10:00 am) while the one outside underneath the *kamalig* regularly starts at 1:00 pm and lasts for about three to four hours depending on the agreement of the players on up to what time they can stay. Play in both *pasugalans* usually ends before sundown. The patrons of the *pasugalan* inside the house mostly come from neighboring houses in the Looban while the *pasugalan* underneath the *kamalig* plays host to a number of non-Looban resident patrons. The *pasugalan* inside the house limits the bets to encourage more customers while the one underneath the *kamalig* allows their customers to set bigger bets.



Figure 1. Pasugalan underneath the kamalig in the Looban

Not all residents of the Looban play mahjong and card games. Nonetheless, the play sites serve as places where all residents can pass the time, relax and be entertained by playing. Those with nothing to do but care for their young children would sometimes drift into the area and watch the games. Occasionally, one of them will be tempted to sit down and play, in which case onlookers sometimes helped care for the child or the child was left to loiter about under cursory looks from the parent as the games progressed.

Mahjong and *tong-its* do not draw large crowds. Players tend to be suspicious of the people who look over their tiles or cards. Any newcomer is usually scrutinized closely. Onlookers either keep quiet or discuss movements with the player whose hand (tiles/cards) they are viewing. Visitors usually stay in one place only. Players may be suspicious that a visitor who keeps going around looking at other player's cards/tiles is giving information to one of the other players, which can easily gain the player an unfair leverage for deciding what cards/tiles to discard or keep. Therefore, visitors would usually remain where they were for the duration of the game session, sometimes discussing moves and options with the player or simply enjoying the game. The game proceeds quietly with an occasional outburst from a player usually expressing his frustration over drawing a tile or card he has no use for or whose pair had been discarded earlier.

As the players have gotten used to playing the game almost daily, their movements have become automatic and conservative, making all game preparations from mixing tiles or shuffling cards to the dealing out of hands in less than 2 minutes, and the entire game including payments lasting for only about 5 to 8 minutes. A game can be finished in less than 10 minutes. Therefore an entire game session can be composed of about 25 to 35 individual games. At the speed by which the games proceed, the players need their full attention on the table. In mahjong, players need to be alert and quick in deciding whether they need the tile discarded by their opponent.⁸

A good player, I have been told, should be able to read their opponent's tiles/cards and at the same time create decoys or strategies that would make it hard for the opponent to determine what tiles/cards they are waiting for. Good players know what cards/tiles to keep, what need to be discarded and when would be the appropriate time to discard the cards/tiles. To be able to

⁸Personally, I cannot even keep up with mahjong if my full attention is not on the table watching the game unfold. At one time, I just took a moment to look at my surroundings, when I looked back at the table the players were already mixing the tiles prompting me to ask who won and by what means.

do that, one should be able to think fast, assess possible moves and decide immediately on the next move so as to be able to have enough time to study the opponent. Players are always badgered if they linger long before deciding to make a move.

Dibersyon: mahjong and card games as make-believe

Some people in the Looban have a distinct view of mahjong as compared to the card games. Card games, no matter how small the bets, are always considered “*sugal*”, however not all people think of mahjong as 'gambling' or “*sugal*”. When I delved into their reasons for regularly playing mahjong, they kept on insisting that mahjong is a 'diversion' (“*dibersyon*”), a form of recreation or a means to pass the time. I also felt that mahjong is esteemed above card games. Compared with card games, mahjong is more than just a game of chance—skill plays a big hand in winning a game, and players need to do a lot of strategizing in order to win.

The 'make-believe' characteristic of games connects with the term *dibersyon* and with the idea that the game is actually used as a temporary escape. This does not necessarily mean that mahjong players are always avoiding something. It may mean that these players find fulfillment in the make-believe world of the game that is in contrast to their real life situation. Taken in this light, *dibersyon* here may actually have some beneficial effects, becoming a reliever of reality or a part of their coping mechanism.

The most obvious temporary escape that mahjong effectively accomplishes is that it keeps the people busy and occupied in an enjoyable manner during the hottest part of the day when activities in Mlang are at their slowest. Mlang is a farm town where most activities start very early to take advantage of the cool morning climate. By noontime the temperature would reach a point that it becomes stifling to continue to work and the heat becomes unbearable. It had become a habit of the people to stay indoors or outdoors underneath shady trees. Activities would usually pick up just before sundown when it is no longer too hot to do work. Games do not usually extend into the evening hours. They were probably discouraged due, in part to the peace and order situation of the general vicinity of the place in Cotabato. Players often stopped playing with the excuse that they still have some errands to do before it gets dark. Correspondingly, it is also this portion of the day when activities in the market start to pick up until the early evening hours when the market stalls start to close for the day.

Those that do not play also find enjoyment in watching the games. Sometimes they share in the excitement of the players when they watch the game. Many of the women who have nothing better to do but care for their

children often find their way to the *pasugalan* underneath the *kamalig*. Otherwise, they can be seen sitting on benches outside their houses talking with each other.

Playing gambling games during funeral wakes can also be a very effective 'diversion' from sleepiness at night and during the small hours of the day since there is the belief that the dead should be guarded at all times before they are buried. Playing is a better way to stay awake than just drinking coffee. Such practice had recently been exploited both by gamblers and the bereaved family (particularly if it is known that the dead came from a family of gamblers too). Taking advantage of the lifting of gambling restrictions during wakes, other card games may be played and they can exceed the usual two-table limit observed during the day. During my fieldwork a member of the family of one of the two *pasugalans* in the Looban died. The evenings turned out to be a gathering of gamblers from all over the place. In this case, the wake lasted for about two weeks, which is an accepted length of time for a wake in the area particularly when they have to wait for members of the family to come home and pay their last respects. Talk during the day would center on the gambling activities of the previous night. They would talk of how players fared in the games, who won, who lost a great deal, what frustrated gamblers did, how one banker fought with a large crowd of bettors on the lucky nine games and so on.

The "*last night*" or the eve before the burial is the climax of the gambling activities during the wake. Gamblers would become bolder and the crowd rowdier than the previous nights. The bereaved family, however, welcomes these happenings. The poorer the bereaved, the more they relied on the *tong* for additional funds.

'*Dibersyon*' happens when a player is relieved of his present situation and shifts to concerns inside the game. The players forget about their worries, particularly the impending relocation. I was told that mahjong players do not come to the table with intentions of buying something out of their winnings. It is also bad luck to use money intended for something else for playing. It dulls the concentration of the player thinking of how he can increase the value of his money so that he can buy the thing he wants from his winnings. In real life most things can be acquired given the right amount of money. The things that people want are expensive so much so that small amounts of money do not hold much interest. The small amount of money used for playing can bring about several hours of enjoyment in addition to the possibility of adding to its value when the player wins.

Since players cannot sit at the table without the amount needed to sustain them throughout the afternoon or until the agreed time to finish, playing also

denotes a sense of affluence within the community, even for that instant only. “Money on the table” was always practiced; players should always put their money on the table to show that they have enough money to sustain them for the duration agreed upon. Players are not allowed to play on credit. When they leave the table, payments are expected to be settled. I have seen how players respond to an opponent who, after sitting for only an hour, dared to stand up without waiting for a replacement and made excuses that he could no longer continue to play because he felt a headache coming. The players became angry and frustrated because they felt they had been cheated out of having the chance to recoup their losses or had barely begun to enjoy the game. Reactions would not have been explosive had this player expressed his wish at the start that he can play for only an hour. The truth of the matter was he did not bring enough cash, expecting his wins to sustain him through the afternoon.

The game elicits a sense of accomplishment among players whenever the strategy they used becomes effective in winning a game. It also elicits a feeling of being in control, of being able to decide what to do. In mahjong, a player has the power to disrupt the game and turn the odds to his favor through the “*pong*” and “*chaw*” moves⁹. The card game *tong-its* also has a means to disrupt game flow through the calling out of a “*draw*” and the subsequent “*resbak*” or challenge to the draw which results to the immediate end of the game.¹⁰ The elation felt when winning is some sort of novelty to them that is seldom felt or which they have very few opportunities to experience outside of the game. Looban families are informal settlers with no permanent jobs and dependent on the odd jobs offered to them. In most cases, they have few options in deciding what to do in order to survive. In Mlang, there are months, especially those months in between planting and harvesting, when people are not hiring and are conserving resources. This greatly affects the people in the Looban where resources are seldom saved and many live on a day-to-day basis.

The game trivializes money by converting it into a plaything. Another aspect of *dibersyon* is in this downgrading of the value of money—for poor people, money is something that they often lack (despite some of their claims

⁹These are calls for game interruptions when players want to make use of a tile that had just been discarded, gaining the right to make the next move, which can result to the loss of turn of the next player due to play. (See the Glossary appended for more detailed instructions.)

¹⁰These are local terms used by players to cut short the game when they feel they have the best set of cards at that point. If nobody challenges the draw by a declaration of a “*resbak*” the player automatically wins the game.

that it is easy to come by). The small amount that they do have is of so little value they make better use of it by diverting themselves through playing.

The dual functions of mahjong and card games

Gambling games are always thought of as 'bad' and resulting to crimes whenever they are present (Zulueta & Liwag 2006) and that is why they are often banned or restricted. However, I saw good and bad things that were manifested through the games among the members of the community at the Looban. The next paragraphs describe how these games can be simultaneously beneficial and detrimental to development and alleviation of poverty in the Looban.

In Mlang, the authorities have a tolerant view toward these gambling games. Many of them in fact also enjoy and play these games. The *pasugalans* are not minded if nobody complains about them. In this sense, the power to regulate the games rests upon the residents of the community. Owners of *pasugalans* must establish good rapport with the community in order to continually operate without interruption from the authorities. In effect games can control the people. Community pressure can influence members to cooperate and to behave well.

The players have also reinforced standards of behavior to avoid disputes among players and their families. As mentioned, one of the things they observe is that no person will be allowed to sit and play without the necessary amount of money needed to play. Players do not play on credit. All payments should be settled right after each game or before the game session ends. Nobody is forced to play, but if their spouses do not approve of their playing, they will have to inhibit themselves. The two *pasugalans* impose different sizes of bets. A person with less money can play at the *pasugalan* imposing small bets.

Children are not allowed to play the games in the *pasugalan*. However, without consciously doing so the players are actually passing on their ideology to the children as small children are often brought to the play site and therefore witness the adults playing with money. To pacify a fretful child, adults would sometimes even give him or her money to play with. Therefore, at a young age, the child learns to play with money.

Looking around me, I observed that the idea of money as a plaything is also manifested in the types of games played by the other age groups in the Looban. School-age children can be seen playing "*taksi*" at a nearby clearing. This is a skill game where the play implement and the target are all coins. In a nearby house, young adults can be seen playing "*bingo*". An

amount of money is paid in exchange for a bingo card. Whoever is able to form the targeted pattern ahead of the other players is awarded with all the proceeds from the sales of the bingo cards. The more bingo cards they pay for, the more chances of winning.

Children are thus motivated to seek some means of earning money to support their games. I was told that most of the children playing *taksi* usually work as garbage collectors of *bote-dyaryo-bakal-plastic* during their free time after school and during weekends. The materials they gather can be sold to a junk shop. Young adults on the other hand have learned to peddle *banana-ques* and peanuts. At a young age the children have started to be resourceful and have the initiative to take care of themselves due to their exposure to playing with money.

The people in the Looban have learned to accept their poverty and live minimally. They do not mind that their houses are not finished or have no flooring. They have learned to share things in public. Most houses do not have water systems, rest rooms and bathrooms so the water pump becomes a common shared public area where people can wash clothes and dishes and even take a bath there. A shared public restroom has also been constructed.

Together with this minimal way of living, they have learned to set aside a portion of what they earn to play with. They do not mind going around wearing threadbare or tattered clothes that badly need repair. I asked the owner of one of the *pasugalan*s how he felt about this. He said money is easy to come by if one knows how to find it. He did not feel the need to save because of this idea. He related how he once came to Mlang and worked as a farmer but he said farming had not been as fulfilling as gambling (through cockfights back then). One can actually win more from gambling within a few weeks of playing than one can earn from three months of farming rice. He related that if he had saved all the money he got from gambling he would have been a very rich man, however he did not regret how he had lived his life. Now that he is old and sickly, his gambling activities are limited to the *pasugalan* and the *ez2* lottery. He lets his daughter and grandson manage the *pasugalan*. He did not prevent them from getting into this line of business because he believes that they are old enough to know what things are good or bad for them.

Many of the players of mahjong are retirees and elderly people and they say that mahjong keeps the mind active. I asked one player how much skill or chance goes into winning in mahjong. I was told that a big part of the game is really chance because when one is dealt with not so good tiles there are limited options for a player to win the game. However, with skill and strategy one can minimize loses. A good player would employ deceptive

moves so as to ensure that his opponents do not read too much into his actions and mannerisms. I have seen one player arrange his tiles differently from the usual grouping of same suits together. Another time I saw a player lay down what would seem to be wild tiles that were ready for discarding but were actually his decoy into making his opponent decide to discard the same tiles. If one cannot win by their own moves, one can earn to pay for the winner by collecting payments for special combinations achieved such as the “*kang*”, “*secret*”, “*beauty*”, “*NEWS*” and “*flowers*”, or avoid becoming the “*supo*” (who pays the winner double), which is what they call the player who causes the win of an opponent through his discarded tile.¹¹

Mahjong and card games in Mlang are games played against peers where an action of one player can affect the games of the rest of the players. Given the history of how the town was populated (when government encouraged the migration of families from Luzon and Visayas in order to develop the forested land it was way back in the 1930s), mahjong and card games, I have surmised, can be seen as similar to playing against several forces (represented by their peers), and elements in their surroundings that threaten their survival and existence. These can be represented by the weather that can sometimes affect their ability to find jobs, their neighbors that can be their competitors in looking for employers or customers, the local government in negotiating for the use of the land where their houses are built on, the conditions at the relocation site, etc.

Mahjong and card game strategies for gambling with life: the relocation

Skill and strategy developed from constantly playing mahjong and card games have found expression in how the players dealt with one crisis that they faced in the first half of the year 2010. This crisis is an example of the many elements in their surroundings that pose threats to their survival and existence. In late December of 2009 the people in Looban received notices that the area where their houses were standing would be used for improvement of the town’s drainage system and for other developments that would cut across their area toward the Mlang River. Dialogues were conducted and a relocation site was identified. The old slaughterhouse was demolished and the informal settlers around the area were requested to transfer to the designated relocation site at an area three kilometers away, a former rice field subdivided into lots of 100 square feet each. It was noticeable that those that did not usually play at the *pasugalans* easily accepted the package of three thousand pesos (₱3,000.00) as relocation

¹¹See the Glossary for a description of the terms used in mahjong.

allowance and the promise to be able to buy the land they were provided through an easy payment system.

But the mahjong and cardgame players resisted the relocation. Like a player bound to lose the game, they applied strategy in minimizing loses like getting the help of certain government agencies such as the Public Attorney's Office and the Urban Development Housing Association to aid them in bargaining for better living conditions in the relocation area. Politicians and the Department of Social Welfare and Development were also consulted for looking into their welfare. They were able to buy time but eventually the total demolition of the part of the Looban took place in July of 2010.



Figure 2. Playing continues as a backhoe works to flatten the Looban

Some residents took advantage of the delay in the relocation to weigh their options and decide whether to go to the relocation area where they could foresee some major adjustments. Others scouted around for other places to relocate for they believed that they will be losing more opportunities of earning if they transfer to an area three kilometers away. Those that relocated early on had brought unfavorable news like the lack of electricity and water system as well as of public bath- and restrooms. Public transportation also had limited access to the place.

The delaying tactics and requests for better living conditions did not pay off however. This is also an aspect of gambling: one runs the risk of possibly getting nothing in the end. Eventually, the Office of the Mayor got fed up and sent them notices of forfeiture because they had not accepted the offer given to them at the allotted time. However, the Looban residents did not leave the area because their livelihood is in the surrounding vicinity of the Looban. They only transferred to some privately owned land near the site of

the Looban and proceeded to continue their lives there. The last news I had was they were still fighting for their entitlement to the relocation package while those that transferred had gone on to rebuild their lives in their new environment.

Summary/conclusion: engaging with anthropology of gambling

Engagement with the issue of urban poor gambling by anthropologists, for some cases, should simply mean the acceptance of their ways and an understanding of why they maintain such activities. The gambling practices, specific to mahjong and card games, of the urban poor informal settlers of the Looban in Mlang, North Cotabato were analyzed here in terms of two characteristics of games. The first characteristic describes that games are make-believe. They create a world separate from the real world where players act according to the rules set in the game. This make-believe nature of games has attracted people to mahjong and card games that serve as temporary escapes from real life situations. In Mlang, the temporary escapes can be seen to be part of the urban poor's coping mechanisms. These temporary escapes work: a) to keep them active, prevent boredom and for entertainment during the hottest and slowest portion of the day, b) to keep them awake at night during funeral wakes (sympathizers would help the bereaved family 'guard' the dead during the wake; what actually happens is that gamblers take this opportunity to be able to gamble to their heart's content), and c) in enjoying a game session of mahjong and card games, people are able to take away their mind from their present concerns and worries. The player finds acceptance and fulfillment in the game. It also denotes a sense of affluence which may contribute to their feelings of fulfillment. In the game, the player may have a hand in controlling his fate as opposed to real life which usually gives them feelings of helplessness.

The dual functions of mahjong and card games brought forth the following insights: a) The game has taught children to treat money as playthings even as it also motivated them to be resourceful at an early age so as to be able to play more; b) The poor have accepted their poverty and try to live minimally by doing without many things; this practice has not taught them to save money and delay gratification, and the little they have, they spend on something that they can enjoy for the moment; c) mahjong games enhance the skill of the player at strategizing and minimizing losses (rather than winning). The games are akin to playing against several forces in the environment that can threaten their survival and existence, represented in the game by their peers as fellow players. However, it can be noticed that such

skill is carried over to handling their current predicament and used in bargaining for a better relocation package.

In conclusion, mahjong and card games fulfill important roles in the lives of the people of the Looban. Such can be their means of coping with hardships and crises even on a temporary basis, in terms of being able to forget their present predicament. The dual function of games highlights that the game does not only affect the adults but almost all the people in the area. As a consequence, there may be some admirable traits that are instilled in the people that help them survive and manage their present predicament, such as resourcefulness. On the other hand, having some of these traits may not necessarily work towards improving their lives.

The skill in strategizing that the players have as a result of their long-time experience in playing mahjong and card games has taught them to weigh their options and to plan; e.g. in order to negotiate for a better relocation package. The experience of fieldwork made me realize that these people have established an existence on a day-to-day basis and any disruption in their usual routine can mean large setbacks in their livelihood. Strategizing may be good so as to be able to determine the choices they have and calculate risks with regard to the issue of relocation. They could appeal their case and seek out agencies and people whom they think could better represent their interests. However, such strategizing can only be effective up to a certain point. They did not realize that their adversary, in this case the authorities, may be playing a different game with different rules, and doing strategizing of their own to be able to achieve their goal.

The economic implication of gambling is what people mostly see as the root cause of its prevalence. This is perhaps due to the visibility of money in all gambling activities. However, when gamblers do not pay much attention to the monetary value of the money involved and are treating money as a plaything, there must be another aspect of gambling that is attracting people to it. I would compare the popularity of mahjong and card games to what Geertz considered to be "*deep play*" (1973). More than the monetary value of the bet, people participate in gambling for the honor, prestige and esteem it brings them among their peers. However, I believe deep play may not necessarily involve big stakes. This idea agrees with how Sallaz (2008) described poker playing among friends in the United States as a ritual of establishing and affirming solidarity. Looking into the history of the town of Mlang, it seemed that connections and the support of friends and community have always been highly valued things in forming the town. Social capital and social networking are important in the effort to survive and to thrive in

the town and these things are enhanced though continuous involvement with people they know rather than strangers, through playing and gambling.

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APPENDIX

Glossary

Bingo – is a numbers game that makes use of a card randomly printed with twenty-four numbers, from 1 to 75, arranged in a square table with five rows and columns and the word “FREE” written on the square at the center. The object of the game is to be the first to form the pattern prescribed by the game master at the start of the game. The game proceeds with the drawing and announcing of numbered small chips one by one from a bottle where all the 75 numbers were placed. The game is usually played by a large group of people, with any number of cards they care to pay for. In the Looban, groups of about five to ten young adults may play them inside a house. The proceeds from the cards are pooled to serve as the reward of the first player who was able to form the pattern with the numbers picked from the bottle. If more than one player was able to form the pattern, the reward will be equally divided among the winners. The game continues with the payment of cards to be played with for the next game and the return of the numbers previously picked inside the bottle to be mixed before the first number is picked and announced. The game session can continue indefinitely until the players agree to stop.

Chaw – a term used in mahjong in order to interrupt the game and claim the discarded tile. Chaws are invoked to complete a run composed of three tiles of a suit in sequence. Only the player on the right of the one who discarded the tile may claim a chaw. The player claiming a discarded tile for a chaw must lay open the meld or run created before proceeding to discard another tile to continue the game. A call for a chaw, however, can be intercepted if there is a claim for a “pong” for the same discarded tile or when a player completes his tile set for a win.

Draw – A “draw” may be called by a player when playmates were not able to lay down melds or even add to the exposed melds of a player. When a player calls for a “draw” and nobody challenges this player, he automatically becomes the winner.

Ez2 – A lottery game of the Philippine Charity Sweepstakes Office (PCSO) in which a player gets to pick a two-number

combination, from 1 to 31, for a bet of ₱10. A bettor wins ₱4,000 if he has picked the two-number combination in the exact order of the result of draw. (Local financiers use this game as a money-making venture by collecting bets through agents and paying the winners through their collection without surrendering the rest of the bets to PCSO).

- Last 2** – is an informal local betting game. The original bet was on the last two digits in the score of a basketball game. Today, local financiers in Mlang take bets on the last two numbers drawn in the regular six-number combination of the lotto of PCSO. Just like *Ez2*, agents are used to collect bets and to pay winnings.
- Mahjong** – a game using 144 tiles and played by four players on square tables with uplifted borders. These 144 tiles are divided into the four sets of tiles made up of the suits of balls, bamboos and characters from 1 to 9, four sets of the four wind direction tiles (*North, South, East and West*), four sets of the “*beauty*” tiles (commonly known as the green, red and white or mirror tiles), four individual “*flower*” and “*season*” tiles of spring, summer, autumn and winter (which are also considered as flowers). Each player contributes in mixing the tiles and forming a wall composed of two rows of tiles piled on top of each other face down. The players get 16 random tiles at the start of the game. The players work to change the tiles to complete the set (to gather five trios or melds and a pair or seven pairs and a meld) by drawing a tile from the wall during their turn at play or by interrupting the game and claiming the discarded tile for a *chow* or a *pong* and proceeding to discard unwanted tiles. Flowers are automatically discarded and a corresponding number of tiles is drawn from the wall on the other side of the wall from which players draw a tile when it is their turn to play. Payments are settled right after a game has been won depending on the type of finish achieved in addition to special combinations made that may warrant payments in the middle of the game.
- Pasugalan** – is a type of play site which hosts both mahjong and card games in Mlang. (It is different from “*mahjongan*” which only allow the playing of mahjong and nothing else.) They are called as such because the owners of the game paraphernalia allow people to come to their place almost everyday in order to play with friends. The pasugalan usually requires payment of *tong* from the players.
- Piat-piat** – *piat* is the local term equivalent to the word “pairs”. *Piat-piat*, on the other hand, is local term used to refer to the game of Poker which is almost similar to the casino game of *pai-gow*. There are three combinations of cards to be arranged in order of

good-better-best. Winning involves besting the card combinations of opponents and the collection of bets from players around the table. It is often played with a banker who pays the players individually if the banker loses and collects all bets for those players who conceded and when the banker wins. The actions of one player on the table do not affect other players on the same table.

Pong – a term used in mahjong in order to interrupt the game and claim the discarded tile. Pongs are claimed when a tile completes a trio of the same suit and number. The player must lay open on the table the pair he has together with the discarded tile to form a trio before proceeding to discard another tile to continue with the game. Unlike the chow, pongs may be invoked by any of the players wanting to claim the discarded tile. The claiming of a pong can cause a player to lose his turn at play for a particular round. Only a win can intercept a claim for a pong.

Pusoy dos – *Pusoy* is the Filipino term for poker. *Pusoy dos* is the Filipino term for the “Big 2” card game. It is so named because the highest ranking card is the number 2 (2-A-K-Q-J-10-9-8-7-6-5-4-3 ranking of cards in descending order) and between the same rank of cards the diamond takes precedence over other suits (diamond-hearts-spades-clubs ranking in descending order). The game makes use of combinations of cards from the original poker game such as pairs, triples, and five-card combinations – the straight, full house, flush, four of a kind or quads with a wild card, and the straight flush. Singles are also used. The object of the game is to be able to discard all the cards that have been dealt to the player. In a game with four players, each player holds 13 cards and the first to play shall lay down the 3 clubs as a single card or in combination with other cards. The next player to play should lay down the same combination of cards that has a higher rank. The game continues until all the three players cannot best the last card combination. The player who made the last throw has the option to change the combination and start another round until no can top up the last combination again. The game continues until one player is able to lay the last of his cards on the table and wins the game. Losers pay the winner the monetary equivalent of all the cards left on their hand.

Resbak – is the term used to challenge a call for a “draw” in tong-its. Both the cards of the one who called the “draw” and the challenger are laid on the table for comparison. Whoever has the least number and values of cards wins the game taking into

consideration that number cards from 1-9 has lesser values than cards with people such as the jack, queen and king.

Supo – is a term in mahjong that is used to identify the player who discarded the winning tile. The penalty for being the *supo* is having to pay the winner double the basic win amount.

Taksi – is a game locally played, usually by boys from 6-10 years old. Each player places a predetermined number of one peso (₱1.00) coins inside a square outline made by a stick on the ground. A line is also made about three meters away as the starting point. Each player takes a turn in throwing a peso toward the line from the area of the square. The player who is able to throw his money nearest the line gets to start the game. The object of the game is to be able to hit the coins inside the square. Any coin that comes out of the square becomes the property of the hitter. A player continues to play for as long as a coin comes out of the square every time he throws his one peso implement. He stops when no coin comes out of the square after a throw and the next player due to play takes his turn at throwing his one peso implement toward the square. A player can eliminate other opponents by hitting their implement coins and claiming them for his own. The game ends when all the coins inside the square were taken. The next game begins after all the players have placed their bets inside the square.

Tong-its- is a card game composed of three players. Each player is dealt 12 cards with the rest of the cards placed at the center of the table upside down. The object of the game is to be able to lay down all the cards at hand through melds in sequence or trios and quads and to add to melds (“*sapaw*” locally termed) of opponents already exposed on the table. The first player due to play picks the top card on the pile at the center of the table then proceeds to discard a card upside down for the next player. If a meld was created by the card picked from the pile on the table the player has the option to expose it and lay on the table or keep it for a while. If the next player finds that a meld can be created from the discard of the previous player, the meld must be exposed before proceeding to discard another card for the next player due to play or he may altogether disregard the discarded card and pick a new card from the pile on the table. The play continues with each player picking a card (whether the discard or a new card) exposing completed melds and adding to the melds of playmates until all the cards are disposed off for a win. At the start of the game each player sets aside the prescribed amount for the pot money. Money is added to the pot money after each game aside from paying the winner the difference of

the values of the cards left after the game. If a winner wins two consecutive times, he gets the pot money. Otherwise, the game continues and the pot money accumulates after each win.

Tong – is an amount predetermined at the start of the game that a winner should pay to the ‘house’ by way of placing the prescribed amount in a receptacle on the table. The payment of *tong* at the end of each game is not strictly monitored. It is the responsibility of the winner to drop the prescribed amount into the receptacle. Sometimes the players remind the winner of this responsibility. Tong serves as the income of the owners for the use of their equipment (table, chairs and cards or mahjong tiles).

Maria Stella R. Salazar is Assistant Professor in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of the Philippines (UP) in Mindanao. She is currently pursuing a PhD in Anthropology at the University of the Philippines, Diliman, through a UP Doctoral Studies Grant. Email: msrs2nd@yahoo.com.