

Upuan Etymology

TAGALOG, CENTRAL AND SOUTHERN LUZON ISLAND, NORTHERN PHILIPPINES. *The nuances of language are shown by the intricate ideational network created by a single word in the language of the Tagalog, the largest ethno-linguistic group in the Philippines.*



Collection Paz M. Rebullar

A 1932 studio photograph of a Tagalog young woman named Gaying, from the province of Cavite, seated on a Western chair, dressed in the typical terno of the period, and with a feather fan accessory.

UPÓ IS NOW the generic word that is used to describe sitting, and upuan is that which is sat upon. The word *opo* occurs in *Vocabulario Tagalo*, a dictionary compiled in Laguna “sometime before 1620” by the friar Francisco de San Antonio, OFM (and reorganized by the Dutch Filipinoist/philologist Antoon Postma.). *Opo* is described as “*el acto de estar uno parado*” or literally to be in a state of “stop”, to be halted, though in what position, or on what, is not specified.

Three other words in that dictionary are in use today to describe sitting: *licmo*, “*sientate con la carga*” or to sit with one’s load, and which today is *likmu*, to sit, and *likmuan*, a seat; *locloc*, now *lukluk* or *luklukan*, the former the verb, the other the noun, described as *asentamiento*, or settlements, which today is used to usually mean a seat of power; and the third, *tingcayar*, which we are familiar with as *tingkayad*, which is sitting on one’s heels.

Although not in that dictionary, still in use and both meaning to sit on the floor or ground are *talungko* and *lupasay*, the latter now having the nuance of throwing one’s self on the ground, as in a tantrum.

For pre-Hispanic islanders, sitting was floor level – on mats or *banig* woven from the abundant flora, or on bare floor of bamboo, reeds, perhaps even hardwood. Until now, many Filipinos have the capacity to sit on the floor or on their haunches Filipino bodies having retained vestiges of the physicality that allowed these positions.

Consider now how and that which most of us sit on, a chair. In the book *Philippine Household Antiques and Heirlooms* (1983), Felice Prudente Sta. Maria wrote: “*The chair came in with the Cross. In Cebu, Datu Humabon and Magellan attended Mass seated on wooden chairs upholstered in red and violet velvet brought down from the Spanish boats; lesser chiefs sat on cushions, commoners on mats... After Mass, Magellan offered a chair to Humabon with the advice that his men carry it before him; in Europe and Continental Asia, the Lord’s chair symbolized His Majesty.*”

Thus, a chair as status symbol had its start. But the seat/chair as a status symbol also occurs in non-Christianized/non-Hispanized groups in the Philippines. Although the Cordillerans of northern Luzon are commonly pictured gathered around seated on their haunches, they have a status seat. The Ifugao bench of distinction is the *bagabi*, the presence of which under a Tuwali Ifugao home meant that the owner was prosperous and a person of good standing in the community, as the making of this bench involved an expensive, long-drawn ritual. The seat of honor among the Maranao is actually an elaborately decorated bed surrounded by family heirlooms at the center of a *torogan* or royal house, where the owner sits attending to an audience. As indicator of position in society, the elaborateness or intricacy of the work, the labor applied, the rarity or cost of



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An Ifugao mumbaki, a ritual specialist, in a typical native seated posture, with a ritual box close to his right foot.

the material/s used and the length of time it took to create or produce, proportionately expressed the social standing, the financial capacity and possibly, the ascendancy of the owner.

A Philippine adage goes: *Kung makukuba nang paupo, buwag nang tumayo*. Although some have translated this to mean minimum effort for maximum effect, older and sager Filipinos interpret this to mean that if an issue can be solved while sitting, there is no need to stand up and settle the issue physically. That sitting is nuanced with the notion of peace-keeping is perhaps something to be remembered.

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