

The Tersena as an Ilokano Version of the Public Sphere

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ABSTRACT

I explore the potential of a *tersena* to be a public sphere where discourses happen and yield fruitful interlocation of reason in relation to social and political issues. I use Habermas' conception of the public sphere as a framework in discovering the potentiality of the *tersena*. At the same time, I use the Ilokano Nakem philosophy to root the *tersena* in its cultural setting. I interviewed a very limited number of customers and vendors who are Ilokano by birth, and in the context of the *tersena*. I tried to answer the following questions: 1) What are the common topics that are discussed in the *tersena*? 2) How would the *tersena* be considered as a public sphere? and 3) How does an Ilokano perceive the discourse in a *tersena*?

Keywords: *tersena*, public sphere, Ilokano, communicative action, Habermas, *nakem*

Introduction

The *sari-sari* general store is a lifeline where people can find a variety of products sold at retail prices. It is also a place of leisure and relaxation especially those with ample space where people/consumers can linger and enjoy life. After getting their stuff, some customers tend to stay around and consume the products they bought, like food, drinks, etc. Some individuals gather there to share their neighborhood experiences, while others would simply enjoy their leisure time. The word “sari-sari” is a Filipino term that is translated as “variety” or “everything” which is evident in the wide array of products being sold in that establishment and it is run by a family in a neighborhood (Sari Sari Store.com n.d.). In a sari-sari store, the products sold vary from the basic commodities like food, drinks, and medicine, up to some household materials like detergents, cleaning agents, even gasoline. The variety of products sold is infinite based on the needs of the community where a store is

situated. As of 2024, there are 1.3 million sari-sari store operators in the Philippines and efforts are being made to improve quality of service, financing, and transactions (Dagooc 2024).

The Ilokano word for sari-sari store is “tersena”¹ and it is an adaptation of the Spanish word *tercena* which means village store, small retail store, or shop (Gelade 1993). The establishment is a transactional/business-oriented one under the category of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSME) because of having a small capital and a limited number of consumers. The secret to the sustainability of a tersena is to have a friendly atmosphere between the owner/manager and the customer. The owner and customer should maintain a friendly relationship, fostering small talk and genuine interactions, which can lead to customer loyalty and business growth. This kind of interaction among the people is inherent given that most of these establishments nationwide are in residential areas and are typically operated from a portion of the owner’s house (Chen 1997, 89). This signifies that a tersena is a neighborhood-oriented establishment. It may be the case that the tersena is in the porch/facade of the house or it can be that it is adjacent to the owner’s house. McIntyre (1955, 66) describes a tersena as such:

... the store is merely an open, stall-like recess on the lower floor of a dwelling. Nearly every block has one to four such stores, located on the corners of the crossroads, with an occasional store in the middle of the block. The range of customers must be limited to the immediate vicinity. Poor neighborhoods, even the most destitute group of squatters’ shacks, have a surprisingly large number of these stores.

Aside from the economic function of the tersena, it also serves as a hub where human interactions occur. Catching up, exchanging information, and cultivating a sense of community happen among the people (Kapampangan Media 2023). In a sense, the tersena is a place where everyone is treated the same, for they are there to avail themselves of the products that the tersena offers. Additionally, the tersena may be used as a location for posting of notices from the barangay or municipal government, leading to public information and awareness. Public awareness can start a discussion among the people who visit and could actualize the potential of the tersena as a “public sphere.”

It is evident that a tersena is a locally owned business that serves mostly the lower and middle classes in a community. People are able to purchase their essential needs in small quantities at reasonable prices. Also, people can “hang out” in the premises of the tersena especially when consuming the products bought there, particularly food and beverages, including alcohol and cigarettes.² Due to its accessibility

to both individual patrons and groups, the location facilitates the emergence of storytelling. Although narratives may initially seem confined to personal matters, they may reveal a broader scope, encompassing topics extending beyond individual concerns. The discussions at a tersena may differ from those that take place in other public settings, such as barber shops or marketplaces. The tersena's embeddedness within a particular community encourages increased awareness and a deeper engagement with common concerns, in contrast to the more fleeting and diffuse encounters found in other public spaces. Because of this embeddedness, a collective awareness surrounding local issues emerges, influencing the conversation in ways that are less likely to happen in settings with less ties to the community. This distinction becomes clearer when considering the Filipino idiom "kuwentong barbero," which refers to exaggerated or distorted stories passed from person to person (Bautista 2022). The nature of small talk in a barbershop, as implied by this idiom, suggests that conversations can become dubious or distorted due to interactions with multiple customers within a limited timeframe; customers typically do not linger after availing of certain services. In contrast, the tersena offers a space where individuals can stay longer, often while enjoying *merienda*, creating opportunities for more focused interactions.

With this assumption, I see the viability of these conversations to revitalize the public sphere that Habermas developed in his studies. At the same time, I hope to unveil an Ilokano sense of public sphere which can be unique depending on its context in the community. Knowing that the tersena is a hub of information and connections among the peoples of the community, I will venture into how Ilokanos approach discourses in the tersena given their shared language and lifeworld. I explore the potential of the tersena as a public sphere within a locality, addressing the following research questions: 1) What are the common topics discussed in the tersena? 2) How can the tersena be characterized as a public sphere? and 3) How do Ilokanos perceive discourse within the tersena? The findings may provide insight into how spaces for discourse emerge in everyday life. Furthermore, I hope to contribute to the understanding of how communities, such as those of the Ilokanos, utilize spaces for active participation in broader societal conversations. Finally, this study seeks to reframe the perception of the tersena, from its negative connotations of rumor and gossip to its potential as a space for information exchange, rational discussion, and civic engagement.

I also employ a qualitative design, using a phenomenological approach to understand individual experiences and interpret the meanings derived from them (Bhandari 2020). Data collection involved semi-structured interviews with two store owners and one customer, admittedly a very limited number. One store owner and the customer were located in Barangay Carlatan, San Fernando City, La Union, while

the other store owner was from Barangay Urbiztondo, San Juan, La Union. These locations were selected based on accessibility, with the former being near my workplace and the latter near my residence. Interviews were conducted in the Ilokano language, audio-recorded, and subsequently transcribed into English by the author. Furthermore, ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the research process. Prior to the interview, participants were provided with a consent form, which they read and signed to indicate their voluntary participation. Lastly, all collected data were treated with strict confidentiality and used solely for this study.

Habermas and the Public Sphere

Jürgen Habermas is one of the prolific socio-political philosophers who worked alongside Adorno and Horkheimer. These philosophers are considered part of the so-called “Frankfurt School” which specialized in critical theory. In this school of thought, they used Marxist philosophy to analyze issues such as commodification, reification, fetishization, and mass culture, arriving at the concept of Cultural Marxism (Zalta 2023). In the 1930s-1960s, there was the rise of “mass culture” where technology played a vital role in the massive production and distribution of culture products (music, film, art, etc.). These led to inactivity and passivity of people in accepting these culture products that, in turn, could alter their consciousness (Cole 2017).

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer are considered as two of the prominent figures of the Frankfurt School and one of their central works is entitled *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In this book, both argued that the Enlightenment which intended to liberate the peoples from the confines of superstitions and beliefs became an instrument in controlling and manipulating people through rationalization (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944, 6). This development led to their formulation of instrumental reason, characterized by an emphasis on practicality and utility rather than its potential for emancipation. This prioritization of utility, they argued, facilitates the exploitation and objectification of both humanity and the natural environment. Capitalism is identified as a principal agent of this exploitative commodification, extending its reach, in their analysis, into the cultural sphere through the apparatus of the culture industry. Culture is now mass produced, creating standardized, predictable cultural products, and consumed by the population to maintain social order by suppressing critical thinking and maintaining the prevailing status quo (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944, 94). They invited people to be critical of their socio-economic conditions, through arts and culture, and to resist the commodifying hold of capitalism in the arts and culture. At the same time, people

should challenge/critique the existing power structures to achieve genuine emancipation that is really the aim of Enlightenment.

Herbert Marcuse provided a critique on capitalism and the capitalistic society that controls the population, suppressing critical thinking and making people submissive to the system. He saw the society where he was as designed to sustain the status quo of a system that silences opposition and absorbs dissent (Marcuse 1991, 3). His society was perpetrating the alienation of the population, leading to people having a one-dimensional thinking, part of the title of his book. In that book, he discusses the case of the one-dimensional man who is not only limited to his blind conformity and commitment to capitalism as a worker, but also incapable to get out of that “box” (referring to the routinary life of a worker) to critique the world and imagine a better one (McGrath 2024). The emphasis here is on the lack of imagination among the people. The lack of imagination is an effect of alienation forged by capitalist society. Because of this, there is a need for people to be emancipated from alienation, and technology can be utilized for this (Marcuse 1991, 18).

From this group of pioneers of the Frankfurt School comes Jürgen Habermas who espoused a different take. In his early years in the Frankfurt School, he was known to be a disciple of Adorno but later diverged for he reinterpreted enlightenment differently from his predecessors. Habermas had a positive view of modernity, believing that it is an “unfinished project” to be continued for human emancipation rather than as a “pathology” or disease, as his precursors deemed it to be (Vallespin 2023). The unfinished project that Habermas raised is a manifestation of the complex and ever-dynamic structure of society that is greatly molded in the multitude of interactions, communications, and historical upbringings. Given the dynamism of human society, social theory is to be seen and understood as both a theory and practice directed towards emancipation and self-determination (Philosophy Institute 2023). To support this, Habermas saw one of the tenets of the post-modern/contemporary world: its self-contradiction through self-reference, the effort to undermine some presupposed concepts like freedom, subjectivity, or creativity (Aylesworth 2005).

One key element in realizing emancipation is the concept of the “public sphere.” This is understood as a space where public opinion is formed, access is free for citizens, and discussions occur in an “unrestricted fashion” (University of Washington Press 2016). In his early work, Habermas emphasized the importance of establishing such spaces for developing a rational and normative society where everyone has the chance to participate in public discourse. This concept of the public sphere is central to his book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Habermas later addressed certain critiques of this work, refining his ideas in his 1984 publication, *The Theory of Communicative*

Action (Dahlberg 2004, 3). Habermas's extensive research into the historical development of public spheres, including his analysis of the historical manifestation of the bourgeois public sphere and its proclaimed liberal ideals, informed his own ideal conceptualization of this space (Dahlberg 2004, 5). The conditions imply that these public spheres should be accessible to all, equal in terms of the participant's treatment and opportunities in speaking, rational in terms of the information being expressed, independent from coercion and manipulation, and lastly, inclusive in terms of the participant's diverse origins and perspectives (Habermas 1984, 289).

I used Dahlberg's (2004) criteria in considering a place as a public sphere. His criteria are anchored on the necessary conditions that Habermas implicitly stated in his conception of public spheres. The criteria of Dahlberg are: (1) a reasoned change of problematic validity claims, (2) reflexivity, (3) ideal role-taking, (4) sincerity, (5) formal inclusion and discursive equality, and (6) autonomy from state and corporate power (Dahlberg 2004, 2).

Under the first criteria, "a reasoned change of problematic validity claims," the argumentation process should be universal and it should also consider the other participants who might get affected by the points in the discourse (Dahlberg 2004, 7). This simply means that the interlocutors should align their reasoning to a more universal level, a necessity. Habermas is clear that the content of an argument should cover all aspects of the society regardless of the class/status of a participant (Habermas 1984, 287). The universal character of a public sphere is due to the all-encompassing character and scope of discourses. At the same time, participants should be willing to put forward their ideas for critiquing by other interlocutors to measure the "universal" character of their claims.

The second criteria is "reflexivity," where the participants question and transcend whatever their initial preference may have been (Dahlberg 2004, 8). Reflexivity requires a critical examination and evaluation of one's position in the public sphere through one's own perspectives, values, assumptions, and other considerations (Habermas 1992, 449). This suggests that participants reflect on the matters of discussion at a personal level, potentially using these reflections to inform their subsequent contributions to the discourse. As argumentation unfolds, participants are prompted to evaluate the validity of the presented arguments, requiring a willingness to dynamically reconsider and, if necessary, modify their own viewpoints in response to compelling counterclaims or justifications.

The third criterion is "ideal role taking," where the participants put themselves in the position of all those potentially affected by the claims under consideration and consider the situation from these other perspectives (Dahlberg 2004, 8). It tells the participants to

be hermeneutically open and sensitive to how others understand themselves and the world. This involves impartiality and respectful listening (Habermas 2001, 34). This criterion serves as an invitation for the participants to situate themselves in the situation of the other to have a glimpse of the perspective of the other. Furthermore, it is imperative that the participants put themselves into the shoes of the other participants/subjects to have a deeper and meaningful understanding of the context behind other participants.

The fourth criterion is “sincerity,” where participants make sure that their arguments are truthful and free from any form of deception, and each participant is sincere enough that all relevant information has been conveyed to everyone present (Habermas 2001, 34). This criterion assumes that participants’ convictions and values are centered on truth. In addition, it is imperative that all members of a public sphere be truthful to themselves, to their fellow interlocutors, and to the arguments that they convey and how they deliberate the matters at hand.

The fifth criterion, “formal and discursive equality,” stipulates that each participant has an equal opportunity to participate, contribute, critique, deliberate, and offer insights on the topic under discussion (Habermas 2001, 34). This criterion requires two conditions: the inclusion of all relevant perspectives and discursive equality, ensuring that all affected individuals can participate equally in the discourse, free from restrictions or categorizations that might impede the process (Dahlberg 2004, 9). Consequently, inclusion is crucial at this level, as discourses ideally transcend socio-political disparities by bringing together participants from diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

The last criterion is “autonomy from state and corporate power.” This criterion entails that a public sphere should be independent from any internal and external coercions from any forces of power that might affect the quality of ongoing discourse (Habermas 1984, 25). In other words, its independence from coercion makes the interlocutors motivated with rationality rather than fear and anxiety that may affect the flow of discourse.

These conceptualizations and criteria suggest that the public sphere functions as a space where individuals actively contribute to the formation of public opinion, shaping their ideas and values toward the collective good. This active engagement among participants in public discourse reflects a normative ideal of rationality and openness. Rationality as a norm emphasizes the importance of truth-seeking, clear and precise language, and the intelligibility of arguments, while openness signifies a participatory, engaging, and non-coercive environment where participation is accessible and free from undue influence or manipulation

The Tersena as a Public Sphere for Ilokano

I examine the tersena as a potential public sphere within an Ilokano community. I divide the examination into two sections. The first section explores the relationship between Ilokano cultural values and practices and their manifestations within the tersena, analyzing how these values shape the dynamics of interaction and discourse within the space. The second section is a critical analysis of the tersena in relation to Habermas' conceptualization of the public sphere, identifying points of convergence and divergence and exploring the implications of these comparisons for understanding the tersena's function within Ilokano society.

The Ilokano in a Tersena

The Philippines is a coagulation of diverse cultural-linguistic groups, each with distinct ways of understanding and inhabiting the world. While this diversity is a source of national pride, it also presents a potential site for the assertion of hegemony by dominant cultural-linguistic groups (Aurelio and Calinawagan 2015, x). As part of broader efforts to articulate a truly representative "Philippine" philosophy, the concept of "Ilokano-Amianan" has emerged, seeking to articulate and disseminate the distinct cultural and philosophical contributions of the Ilokano people.

The Ilokano are the people who descended from Austronesian-speaking peoples from southern China and Taiwan. They resided in the northern parts of Luzon through the land bridges and through sailing. The word Iloko, the language, came from the prefix "I" which means "people of" and "*lokong*" which means "low-lying terrain" or "lowlands" in contrast to "*golot*" that means "mountains" or "highlands," hence "Igorot" (Alvarez 1969, 143). The Ilokano are considered as the "People of the lowlands" and other translations would also say that it could mean "People of the bay" for "look" is translated as "bay."

Another way to understand and deal with the Ilokano is by venturing into the concept of *nakem*. *Nakem* is an Iloko word which can have many meanings depending on usage. One of its most used definition, or translation, is "consciousness." Yet it is much better if it denotes the "interiority" of a person in an Ilokano sense as it is comparable to "*loob*" in the Tagalog parlance (Alterado 2020). The word *nakem* can be seen in two parts: the prefix "*na-*" which signifies fullness or wholeness, as in the word "*naparaburan*" or wholly blessed/gracious; "*-kem*," on the other hand, denotes the interiority of a person. This is comparable to the Iloko word "*akem*" which means one's role or responsibility to others or the community (Alterado 2020). *Nakem* is understood as the interiority of an Ilokano,

that serves both as a driving force behind their existence and the source of their value system. From the perspective of the tersena as a public sphere, the *kinanakem*³ of Ilokanos manifest not only their rational capacity regarding societal issues but rather their personhood (*kinatao*). Therefore, the *nakem* of an Ilokano directs thought, actions, and decisions in achieving “*naimbag a nakem*” (good life) through introspection and interaction with others (Alterado, Nebrija and Villanueva 2023, 24).

Since *nakem* drives Ilokanos in achieving a good life, their interactions in the tersena can be reflective of such direction. Participant A, a full-time store owner for almost 10 years, stated that “*kaaduan a pagsasaritaan ditoy store ko ket mapan iti padas-padas da panggep iti karigat iti biyag gappo atoy a pandemic. Naawan pagbirukanda ken dagiyay dadduma ket makaaramidda ti dakes kasla agtakaw tanno lang adda pangbiyag da kadagitoy a tiempo*”⁴ (Most of the conversations here at my store are about the hardships that they experience due to the pandemic. They lost their jobs that some resorted to doing bad things such as theft just to have sustenance these trying times). Participant B, a store owner for almost 20 years and working as a school administrator, stated “*Iti kada grupo nga umumay ittoy, adda ti kanya-kanyada nga saritaan. Nu kaspangarigan dagiyay laborers, idamag ko kenya ‘so, nalpas man trabahoyon ken kakaawatyo diyay sweldoyo, anyay ngay garuden, igatangyo man ti inumenyon?’ Isungbatda met nga para pamilya diyay dadduma, pang-eskwela diyay dadduma, ken adda met latta pang happy-happymi a*” (In every group that comes here, they have their own stories/conversations. For example, I asked the laborers ‘So, your job this day is finished, and you have your salary, what now? Are you just going to spend it on alcohol/drinks?’ They responded that some will be for the family, some will be for school allowances, and there is still some left that will be used for their happy times). Participant C, a patron of the tersena of Participant A where his workplace is adjacent to added, “*Nu diyay tono it boses na ket nagsabalin, ilimlimit kon ti bagbagikon a sumanarita*” (If the tone of one’s voice changes, I limit myself in talking).

The participants’ accounts reveal a strong sense of self-awareness and social consciousness among Ilokanos, particularly during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Ilokanos actively engage in observing and interpreting their surroundings (*aglawlaw*), demonstrating an inherent curiosity and a desire to understand their circumstances. This observation-driven awareness (*palpaliiw*) fosters a deep understanding of their community and the challenges faced by others (Alterado and Jaramilla 2021, 31). While acknowledging the resilience of Ilokanos in overcoming economic hardships, their accounts manifest a sense of concern to those who engage in illegal activities for survival. These concerns underscore the strong sense of

nakem within the Ilokano community, where individuals are deeply concerned about the well-being of others and strive to support each other during challenging times (Alterado and Jaramilla 2021, 32). The manifestation of one's *kinanakem* in discourses in the tersena is tangent to the "Uppat a Pannuli" (Four Pillars) in the article "Nakem and the Politics of Identity" by Danilo Alterado. These pillars constitute the Ilokano as a political agent driven by interiority (one's *nakem*) and responsibility toward others (one's *akem*).

The first pillar is the negative identity of Ilokanos. This means that a person possesses the capability to critique the identity imposed on him, namely as an Ilokano (Alterado 2020). The point of this pillar is to critique the imposed identities on Ilokanos, especially the stereotypes that do not really summarize who an Ilokano is. An example of this is on being *kuripot* (stingy). An Ilokano is *kuripot* not for the sake of being one; they are sparing to save on resources given that the Ilocos region has scarce agricultural lands (Garen 2024). In relation to this, Participant B stated that "*Atoy store ket maysa a lugar wenno oportunidad nga i-share da ti kaririknaan, ideas, padapadasda, ken uray ti rurud da. Since maysa atoy a public place, mabalín da nga maibaga ti kayat da*" (This store is a place or an opportunity where they can share their thoughts, ideas, experiences, and even anger. Since it is a public place, they can express what they want to express). Moreover, the same participant added, "*Kenjami a public servant, it is more than money, it is i-guide mo dagiti ububbing/tattao ti nasayaat*" (For us as public servants, it is more than money, it is to guide the children/peoples towards goodness). Her statements do show that a tersena is not just an economic place where they are just there to earn but rather, the tersena is a place where they can have conversations. These conversations expand the role of tersena into a space where people can engage with each other. The role of this pillar, then, provides a different view of a tersena which makes it as a potential in the cultivation of one's perspectives and ideas.

The next pillar, "rationality and freedom," characterizes an Ilokano engaging in discussions within the tersena, expressing oneself freely (Alterado 2020). Rationality in discourse happens when an Ilokano upholds a level of expression of thought based on verifiable facts and on knowledge acquired through education and experience. Freedom, on the other hand, is seen in one's capacity to express oneself without any threat of coercion or fear. Hence, a tersena can become a place of rationality and freedom to the extent that participants allow fact-based discussions to flourish, or discourage discussions that are detrimental to oneself and others. As Participant A stated, "*Adda met ti saritaan nga mapaspasamak ittoy store ken makiramramanak met dadduma. Nu kasta ket dirdiretson ti saritaanen tas agpapada ti panagtrato ti maysa ken maysa nga adda idia. Nu dagitoy gamin ket adda iti sharing ti kapanunutam*

ken ti kapanunutan da ngem saan lang nu maipanggeppen ti panagapi wenno panagdadael da ti padada nga tao. Pati payen dagiti agpapabasol. Maysa pay dagiti agararammid ti chismis. Nu kastan ti pagturingendan ket saan kon itulok nga pagsaritaanda ti kakasta" (There are conversations / discussions that are done here in my store and I join these sometimes. These events lead to sharing of my ideas and perspectives and their ideas and perspectives but not into those that defame others, including those who blame others and create gossip. If this is the case, I do not let them continue such conversations). Participant B stated that "*Nu saanen nga nagkikinaawatanen dagiti nababarteken, pasardengekon, saan kon a lakwan isuda tas paarwidekon idia balbalayda, to maintain peace and order ittoy store*" (If there is a misunderstanding in the conversation between the drunk people, I cut their conversation. I would not sell them drinks anymore, and tell them to go home. This is to maintain peace and order in my store). While Participant C added, "*Saan nak makibibyangen nu personal a concerns or issues ta saan nak met a kasjay a tao. Nu biyag ti sabali ket problemada diayen* (I do not join conversations if it is all about personal concerns or issues because I am not that kind of a person. If the lives of others are the topic, those are their problems). Such statements prove that in participating in a discussion, one must be rational. More particularly, it is essential for an Ilokano that there must be an adherence to what is truthful in order to fulfill *kinanakem*, to attain what is good and true (Alterado 2015).

The next pillar is "cultural," which points towards the shared history, language, territory, value system, etc. among the interlocutors (Alterado 2020). Language makes culture thrive through time and space. The language one uses portrays the kind of lifeworld one belongs to, for it is part and parcel of one's life (Alterado, Nebrija and Villanueva 2023). Hence, the Iloko language shows the everyday life and culture of an Ilokano. At a tersena, the use of a common language in conversations could yield a shared understanding of the lives of the interlocutors. To illustrate, Participant A stated, "*Adda maadal ti maysa ken maysa. Nu madi or against ti maysa, maadal mo, mapanunotmo nu apay a kastoy. Adda iti maymaysan to a pinnakaawat*" (We can learn from each other. If it is against someone, you can learn from it. You can think about why it is such. From this, we can have a common understanding about it). This sharing is also evident in what Participant C said: "*Maminsan ket makaadalka idia ibagbagada, maammowam diay sitwasyon nu anya mapaspasamak idia*" (Sometimes, you can learn from what they are saying. You can learn about the situation and what is happening there). The sharing done in the tersena is a manifestation of *kannawidan* (culture) which envelops the totality of Ilokano life and being shared with or passed from people to people (Alterado and Jaramilla 2021, 98). The Iloko term *tawid* (inheritance/heritage) denotes a process of transmission, wherein the inherited element is simultaneously

understood and accepted by the recipient. The *tersena* then functions as a cultural cornerstone of Ilokano identity, facilitated by the shared language that binds participants together, enabling them to share experiences and learn from one another despite differing perspectives.

Finally, the “emancipation” pillar fosters a sense of shared responsibility among participants in discourses (Alterado 2020), suggesting that the content of conversations should contribute to liberating individuals from oppression or hardship. Known for their industry, Ilokanos often devise strategies to secure daily sustenance, such as practicing frugality (*kuripot*), or seeking employment abroad in pursuit of better economic opportunities (Calinawagan 2015, 125). These efforts lead towards emancipation from poverty, but emancipation may also be about breaking free from the oppressive rule of dominant groups that curtails the “voice” of those in the margins (Agcaoili 2008, 96). In relation to the *tersena*, an Ilokano who engages in conversations may attempt to help alleviate the hardships that other participants experience in their daily lives. To manifest such, Participant B said that *“Adda maysa nga instance where adda maysa a surfer nga gimmatang ket dinamag ko nu apay nagsapa suna agpabaybay. Sinungbat na ket nasapa da nga inayaban ta adda ti surwan da. Tatta, imbagak kenyanan nga ‘dayta trabahoyo ket pansamantala lang ta nakadepende iti iyuumay ti turista ittoy so saan nga agnanayon ata pagsapulanyo.’ Inadvice-ak suna nga agregister da iti SSS tanno adda laketdi maititinngayo for your future ket as the saying goes ‘kung may sinuksok, may madudukot.’ Kunkunada a ngata nga mitir nak ngem at least, nakaibaganak ti pagsayaatan”* (‘There was an instance when a surfer came early and I asked him why he’s early in going to the beach and he responded that there are clients there already. Then, I said ‘your job depends on the influx of tourists coming here thus your job is not a regular one.’ I advised him to register with the Social Security System for him to contribute something for his future. As the saying goes, ‘if you stash away something, you’ll have something to take out.’ Maybe they will say that I am meddling but, at least, I said something that is for the good). In addition, Participant C also said that *“maamowan tayo nu kassanotayo aggaraw or ag-cope kadagitoy mapaspasamak kenyatayo”* (we get to know how we can act upon or cope with the things happening to us). These accounts and experiences in the *tersena* show attempts to help people cope with the hardships that they are experiencing. This emancipation can manifest on a personal level, as exemplified by Participant C, or extend to others, as illustrated by Participant B. Consequently, conversations within the *tersena* represent potentials for emancipation for Ilokanos, offering possibilities of navigating and potentially overcoming personal difficulties. This sharing of perspectives contributes to individual decision-making in daily life.

The tersena also provides insight into Ilokano identity through its implicit function as a space for philosophical reflection. The conversations and discourses within the tersena suggest that participants engage in a form of philosophical analysis and attain a level of philosophical understanding of the topics discussed. The way this is achieved by the participants in the conversations/discourses in a tersena is best explained by Alterado and Jaramilla's "*Maiyyannatup a Panagripirip*" (Appropriated Philosophizing). They conceived such philosophizing as a manifestation of an alternative discourse whose objective is to navigate into the richness of the Iloko culture and life by utilizing an appropriate and contextual approach (Alterado and Jaramilla 2021, 28). Furthermore, Alejandro (2015, 95) claims that doing Ilokano philosophy with its appropriate ways and means unveils and unmask the Ilokano condition. Additionally, Agcaoili (2013) mentioned that this is a way of doing "philosophy in the margins" which is a noble movement in rediscovering those who are not given proper attention/focus.

Maiyyannatup a Panagripirip starts with *palpaliw* (observation) as it presents the person with the richness of the Ilokano lifeworld through tacit experience (Alterado and Jaramilla 2021, 28). In a tersena, people share what they have observed in the community when they are engaged in a conversation/discourse. Most of the time, the topics start from a personal level, for example, family life and personal experiences, up to a wider topics such as politics, society, etc. The three participants shared that most of the conversations/discourses in the tersena are really focused on societal concerns.

Palpaliw also affects how people deal with others and their respective points of view. Participant A stated that "*Makisalsali nak ngem nu makitakon nga ti pagsasaritaan ket about sabali a tao'n nga papan ti chismisen, aglaylo nakon ken saanakon makiramramanen*" (I join these conversations but if I see/observe that they are talking about other people that leads to gossip, I lie low from the conversation). *Palpaliw* gradually unveils the *kinanakem* of an Ilokano. *Palpaliw*, according to Foz (2001), is an existential phenomenology that captures the streams of consciousness that are part of Ilokano ordinary life. Hence, *palpaliw* is vital in Ilokano philosophy's direction towards understanding *nakem*. Moreover, this understanding of one's *nakem* manifests one's *kinatao* (personhood) due to its interconnectedness within its interiority manifested through *pateg* (worth/value) for others (Alterado and Jaramilla 2021, 35). All these discussions about the Ilokano in the tersena makes sense because of the Iloko language, which also makes the phenomenon of the tersena uniquely Ilokano. Agcaoili (2015, xviii) claims that

... we do not own language, in a philosophical sense. Instead, language claims us-owns us. It is through the language that we are known-collectively identified: we are Ilokano precisely because the Ilokano language mediates us. It is a marker- and the first marker. And this first marker is for life. We cannot run away from this mark however much we try.

Within the context of the *tersena*, Ilokanos can express their thoughts and feelings through a common and mutual language. However, the unique character of Ilokano discourse within the *tersena* is particularly illuminated by Yabes's description of the Ilokano as "essentially a utility man," "a man of action," one who "works and drudges" yet remains "reserved and orthodox," tending to conceal and repress emotions (Yabes 1936, 5–7). This seemingly paradoxical combination of industriousness and emotional reserve likely shapes the nature of conversations within the *tersena*, influencing both the topics discussed and the manner in which they are expressed. Ilokanos prioritize practical matters, valuing the utility of things as a measure of their relevance. This emphasis on practicality is evident in the conversations within the *tersena*. Participant B's interaction with a surfer exemplifies this practical dimension, demonstrating how these discourses can directly contribute to the well-being of others. Consequently, within the *tersena*, Ilokanos readily share their experiences, perspectives, and opinions, prioritizing the practical benefit these contributions offer to the recipients. Furthermore, the use of the common Iloko language in these conversations reveals one's *kinanakem* (inner self / character). This disclosure of *kinanakem* through language illuminates an individual's lifeworld and *kinatao* (being / personhood) in relation to self, others, and the environment, fostering mindfulness in their communication.

The Tersena vis-à-vis the Habermasian Public Sphere

Habermas noted that the public sphere is a space where private individuals come together in a rational-critical discourse about public issues (Habermas 1979, 24). The setup of public spheres is in accordance with the evolution of human societies. In the rise of capitalistic and modern societies, these public spheres emerged where educated people met to talk, such as coffee houses and salons (Habermas 1979, 12). The purpose of a public sphere is to serve as a venue for an individual to participate in debates concerning public issues towards attaining consensus on matters of general interest (Habermas 1979, 106). The public sphere, then, is a space where equal opportunity for rational self-expression leads to consensus aimed at achieving social transformation for the common good.

Several characteristics are necessary for a space to be considered a public sphere. First, open accessibility ensures that everyone is welcome to participate in discourse (Habermas 1974, 49). Second, the formation of public opinion is understood as the public sphere's capacity to serve as a venue for self-expression and the creation of public opinion through debate (Habermas 1974, 49). Third, freedom of assembly and expression is essential, enabling citizens to actively participate in discourse (Habermas 1974, 49). Fourth, the public sphere possesses a mediating capacity, facilitating consensus that can influence government matters and decisions (Habermas 1974, 50). Fifth, a public sphere requires critical and rational debate to foster the progression of ideas through deliberation (Habermas 1974, 55). Finally, a public sphere should be normative, meaning that discourse is guided by principles of rationality, democracy, and the elimination of privileges, ensuring equality in deliberation (Habermas 1974, 55).

In comparison, a tersena provides a local public sphere wherein Ilokanos can participate. Discourses within a tersena are guided by several norms: (1) focusing on the issues at hand; (2) avoiding non-rational discussions; and (3) emphasizing practicality. In the first norm, a discourse in the tersena revolves around the issues that the community is experiencing. This resonates with Habermas' idea of a communicative rationality where the participants are geared, through discourses, towards attaining mutual understanding (De Vera, 2014, 150). Participant A's tersena is found near a school and some government offices thus her patrons, mostly employees, do talk about their experiences in the workplace. Participant C, a patron of Participant A's tersena, said, "*ti store, mabalin a tambayan ti empleyado ta mapagtungtunganda iti sitwasyon da kasla diay trabaho da wenno diay boss da*" (A tersena store can be a place where the employees can hang out and talk about their situations, like their work or their boss). Aside from that, discourses could also cover broader societal issues like the past pandemic which ravaged the population and made life difficult for some. *Palpaliw* (observation) among the Ilokanos played a big role in this norm because an Ilokano would talk about anything that was observed / experienced by him. One's *palpaliw* is also a kind of an existential phenomenology for an Ilokano is not merely a spectator but rather as an active participant in making sense of what he observes. What is observed is also grounded in one's *nakem* thus being able to make sense of it.

The next norm is the "avoidance of non-rational discourses." Non-rational discourses are seen as the discourses/conversations that are not focused on the wellbeing of people. This can include gossip, malicious misinformation, or rumors. For Habermas, these kinds of discourses can manipulate the truth, distract people from pressing issues, or wear away trust among peoples (Habermas 1974,

54–55). Since a discourse is grounded with norms or rationality and democracy, these kinds of discourses do not cater to the norms of a public sphere. The Ilokano, with their *nakem*, do reflect this kind of norm. One's *nakem* is his *kinatao* (personhood) hence it is imperative that it should be upheld in its highest dignity (Alterado, Nebrija and and Villanueva 2023, 27). In addition, *nakem* refers to the maturity expected of a person. An Ilokano, as much as possible, avoids discourses that undermine one's value as a person. Gossip/ rumors do damage and destroy the *kinatao* of the other and contradicts one's own *nakem* in upholding human dignity. *Nakem* also constitutes moral character and values which are summed up by the phrase *kinaimbag ti nakem* (goodwill)⁵ that includes the values of integrity, honesty, and respect (Alterado 2015, iii). The concern here is that gossip is inevitable in a *tersena* due to many factors yet people's observation in their community is the starting point of its existence (Turgo 2013, 380). Many people in the *tersena* observe the actions and behaviors of people and are the locus of their discourse. Consequently, these gossips can either strengthen the bond of people within that community, or tear down this bond due to conflicting stories that lead to defaming someone (Turgo 2013, 387). Because a *tersena* can become a ground of gossip and false information, an Ilokano might want to avoid such conversations for his *nakem* does not align with these kinds of interactions, and the results do not help nor respect others' dignity.

Lastly, the importance of practicality in discourse is essential. Practicality is understood as discourses having a lasting impact on the person; he can learn something new about things or his life will improve. This is where the *tersena* shies away from the Habermasian conception of the public sphere. The practicality of a public sphere is rooted in shaping public opinion and facilitating democratic participation for the improvement of the society (Habermas 1974, 54). The discourses done in the public sphere are intended to enact changes in the society through lobbying efforts based on the deliberations in public spheres. Notwithstanding, the discourses should be grounded in rationality for positive change to be achieved. In the *tersena*, on the other hand, discourses are started through sharing of personal experiences and perspectives. These sharing of perspectives are reflective of the practical wisdom that their *nakem* provides that, in turn, influence decisions and actions (Alterado 2015, 16). Here, the participants have the words "*sursuro*" as the manifestation of practicality. *Sursuro*⁶ are the learnings that are garnered through experience which also reflect the wisdom and values of an Ilokano (Agcaoili 2019, 22). The emphasis on *sursuro* over the word *adal* (formal education) is shown by the focus on wisdom, that is on inheriting the values, tradition, and practices that are significant for a meaningful and ethical life (Agcaoili 2019, 27). This is in consonance with the *nakem*, the all-encompassing

character of the Iloko lifeworld. The practical wisdom behind *nakem* is maintaining a balanced and just life through understanding and accepting one's role and responsibilities in relation to oneself, others, and the greater society, including the environment.

The question now is on the viability of a *tersena* as a public sphere. The answer is based on the nature of the discourses that are happening there. As the conditions of rationality and democracy are present in these discourses, the discourses in the *tersena* may be seen as a "local" version of a public sphere. Additionally, Ilokano, as the shared language of the discourses in the *tersena*, influences the flow of discourse due to the shared culture and perspectives of the speaker. Despite being a localized /Ilokano version of a public sphere, a *tersena* is still different in comparison to the ideal public sphere by Habermas for the *tersena* is a localized entity. Most of the discourse in the *tersena* revolves around what is happening in its vicinity. Another difference is in the flow of discourses. While the Habermasian public spheres do specialize in debate and deliberation, the *tersena* starts from a more interpersonal approach like *kumustahan* (talking about one's own life) then it will expand to discourse about issues at hand. And lastly, gossip, rumors, and false information are still prevalent in the *tersena* thus there are still precautions to be observed in discoursing in such places. All in all, the *tersena* has a possibility to be considered as a localized, Ilokano version of a public sphere. These places play a crucial role in the socio-economic and political aspects of people's lives in a community.

Conclusion

I attempted to explore the potential of a *tersena* as a public sphere. The *tersena* does possess the characteristics of a Habermasian public sphere of rationality and democracy where people are critical in terms of what they express, and all people are free to join discourses. A *tersena* is not only a place of business or leisure but rather as a place where discourses can occur and help those who participate. Habermas shied away from the Frankfurt School by creating his philosophy about the public sphere and, later on, the theory of communicative action. These concepts are essential in a modern society for they entail the participation of people in enacting societal and political changes that they want to experience through the creation of public opinion.

On Ilokano character, the participants expressed their experiences in the discourses that they engaged in. They said that the discourses helped them and others regarding issues that they are facing. When Ilokanos participate in discourses, they draw from their *nakem*. *Nakem* is the core of an Ilokano's life where even in

discourses, one's *nakem* affects the way he interacts. Lastly, in a brief comparison between *tersena* and a Habermasian public sphere, both share the characteristics of rationality and democracy of discourse. The only difference is that in a Habermasian public sphere, rationality is the norm, while in the *tersena*, the Ilokanos are grounded in their *nakem* in their discourses.

I offer some recommendations for this research to be further developed. The first recommendation is on the further utilization of Habermas' theory/ies, or any socio-political/philosophical theories, in the explanation of discourses in *tersena*-like public spaces in the Philippines to bring out the unique character of each cultural-linguistic group. Another recommendation is for other researcher/s to increase the number of participants that would respond to interviews, or surveys, to have bigger data. Lastly, I attempted to unearth the richness of the Ilokano lifeworld hence, there is still a need to go deeper and use other vantage points. There are possibly more and different life experiences which people can share. It is a challenge for us to return to the basics of having person-to-person interactions. A *tersena* can be a great place to start. From simple engagements, strong bonds among people could be created towards mutual understanding and strong public opinions that result in positive societal change.

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Notes

1. In this paper, I use *sari-sari* store, possibly known in the entire Philippines, to denote the *tersena* in the Iloko language.
2. This is commonly known as *tambayan* in the Filipino language and as *ayuyang* in Iloko.
3. *Kinanakem* may have many meanings especially if it talks about the inner self of the person. Since *nakem* has a holistic underpinning, one's thought/reason also includes one's own subjectivity.
4. The interviews were done at the height of the pandemic; thus, their responses were in the context of what they were experiencing.
5. *Kinainbag ti nakem* can be equivalent to the Filipino term *kagandahang loob* or "goodwill."

6. "Sursuro" and "ad-adal" can be understood as "learnings" yet in the Ilokano sense, the former is more inclined into the values and attitudes that one can learn while the latter talks about the formal education that one attains. (See Aurelio Agcaoili. 2019. "Sanut, Wayawayaya, and the Naimbag a Biag in Ilokano Philosophy," *Budhi: A Journal of Ideas and Culture* 28 (1): 87–102.)

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