



How the Filipinos' *Tingi* Culture was Co-opted by Big Business

The *tingi* culture, that is, the taking or using of only small portions of a product, is exemplified not only by branded sachets, but also by the small plastic bags containing the necessities of the day, be it a few cloves of garlic, or a few tablespoons' worth of oil or vinegar which are often sold in *sari-sari* stores. Nick Joaquin, National Artist for Literature, once wrote about the country's "heritage of smallness," taking note that enterprise is represented by the *sari-sari* store and commerce by the *tingi*.¹⁹

"Enterprise for the Filipino is a small stall: the sari-sari... Commerce for the Filipino is the smallest degree of retail: the tingi. What most astonishes foreigners in the Philippines is that this is a country, perhaps the only one in the world, where people buy and sell one stick of cigarette, half a head of garlic, a dab of pomade, parts of the content of a can or bottle, one single egg, one single banana."

Filipinos' penchant for *tingi* dates back to the colonial era, continuing up to the post-war period when piecemeal purchases became a survival strategy.²⁰ The practice still persists in the country where 16.6% of the population lives below the poverty threshold²¹ and where more than half of households comprise the poor and lower income class.²² Buying piecemeal has allowed Filipinos to buy only what they need, in the specific amounts they need, so much so that nothing is wasted. Indeed, buying in *tingi* has tided many Filipinos over, especially the cash-strapped and the daily-wage earners.

Enter big business, which decided to capitalize on this facet of Filipino culture for profit, making their products available in single-layer and multi-layer sachet packaging and flooding the market with them. Sachets became a corporate marketing strategy²³ targeting the poor, which, based on the staggering number of sachets used in the country today, shows it has been widely successful. In a matter of decades, the *tingi*

culture, once characterized by sustainable practices that used reusable materials, has been redefined into a culture of convenience dominated by fast-moving consumer goods packed in non-recyclable sachets. As a corporate marketing strategy, sachets have been considered ingenious.²⁴ They are widely perceived to address a need for quality goods without the high price tag. Corporations responsible for the proliferation of sachets in the country often mention that their sachet products are more affordable and are therefore "pro-poor." Sachets have expanded their customer base tremendously, from the lower socio-economic classes to the higher ones. Sachet marketing is also a way to move merchandise faster in stores and into consumers' homes. Sachets are so successful, in fact, that products such as 3-in-1 coffee are only available in sachets.

In a matter of decades, the *tingi* culture, once characterized by sustainable practices that used reusable materials, has been redefined into a culture of convenience dominated by fast-moving consumer goods packed in non-recyclable sachets.

