

CorruptionSpeak in Metro Manila's Streets

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hilippine artistic expressions are traditionally manifested through the medium of dance, song, music, painting, sculpture, poetry, literature, religious festivals and theater. In the modern world, they take the hybrid forms of murals, tarpaulins, comics, film and multi-varied signs and codes as stickers, pin-buttons, cyber art, rock and rap. Whether traditional or commercial, artistic expressions remain pervasive and, because of mass media, have become more innovatively participative of the *masa* (people) in Philippine society.

Artistic expressions are bound up with the life of the community. People seek, convey and draw meanings to their lives through the different signs and codes which they use to transact and negotiate especially with those who wield dominant power. Like the oral traditions of old, these signs and codes are sourced mostly from spoken words within which representations of the world or a particular space or community are created and conveyed. In a small country like the Philippines with more than a hundred languages in use across its 7,107 islands, oral signs and codes abound to lend meaning to the lives of majority of its 90 million people who are limited with the opportunity and facility to develop their own artistry. The use of these signs and codes in the form of words combined with body movement become visible sources of artistic expressions that, for the keen political and cultural observer, can pass off for a whole artistic performance of real-life situation.

There is a new arena where potential sources of artistic expressions are utilized and made more useful for modern-day art forms. This "new" arena and potential source of artistic expressions is a familiar socio-political milieu that is very ordinary to the common Filipino: the <u>streets</u>. These are the streets of Quezon City and Metro Manila that expose more vividly and openly in a familiar setting, the blatant relationship between the few abusive holders of power on the one hand, and the hapless many, on the other. In the streets, political corruption – with all its related signs and codes— is best performed by its key players led by the notorious "Kotong" cops (policemen who extort) on the one hand, and their favorite prey, the taxi and jeepney drivers. (Jeepney refers to a Philippine jeep used to transport passengers.)

Corruption signs

In the streets, signs¹ of corruption are everywhere. The most used and expressed are words that refer to certain acts of corruption by public officials and government personnel. Words such as *laggy*, *areglo*, *padulas* are seen as euphemisms used inside government offices, inside the halls of the *barangay* (village) and Congress even in Malacanang (the presidential palace) but the most notorious ones are used in places where wily *kotong* cops and gullible drivers meet every day at every nook and corner of Metro Manila.

Corruption words proliferate and used daily as a way to transact and negotiate to gain favors or avoid conflict and punishment. These are creative expressions in the form of spoken words by people who hold power and those who are disempowered in order to facilitate their transactions for money or other favors. If there is youth speak, this is corruption speak.

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Corruption speak is the language of corruption. It is already part of Philippine contemporary culture. *Tong-pats* (padded budget), a variation of *patong*; *areglo* (deal); *lakad* (fix), *padulas* (fee given to expedite an illegal transaction), *pampagana* (incentive), *cash gift*, *raket* (racket), *lagay* (bribe), *bukol* (a booty not shared; literally a lump) are among an endless list of corruption words that have gained entry in any local community's vocabulary. Every class and sector of society – business, lawyers, drivers, policemen; capitalists and working class—have their own corruption lingo. Coupled with the words are the body signs – of the hands, arms and eyes – that go with every corruption word to convey a specific message to the recipient.

Corruption speak is openly spoken and... performed by its sets of actors as rampant corruption has become a serious public concern. Corruption is now a major socio-economic and political problem afflicting every government institution and victimizing most especially the vulnerable sectors. It has eroded moral values, put to waste taxpayers' money and development funds, and continues to weaken political institutions.

Police corruption

Among government agencies, the Philippine National Police (PNP) has consistently been described as one of the most corrupt. Next to the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH), the PNP was found by a Pulse Asia survey in 2009 as the most corrupt.

Among various victims of police corruption, Filipino taxi drivers in Metro Manila attest to such crime they being exposed to such sub-culture everyday whether on the streets, highways, or in transportation and traffic offices.

The National Capital Region (NCR), sometimes called Metro Manila (2007 population: 11.5M) has 13,022 policemen distributed among its 14 cities, namely, including Manila and Quezon City, and three municipalities. From the police force and those from the Metropolitan Manila Development Authority (MMDA), thousands of traffic enforcers man the NCR's roads, in shifts, day and night.

Out of some 32,000 registered taxicabs in the country, 17,000 are in Metro Manila. Including some 7,000 colorum units or illegally-operating, the total number of taxicabs plying the streets and boulevards of the NCR is 24,000. With each cab having two shifts of drivers each day, the taxi industry employs 48,000 drivers.

Land transportation, including driving and traffic maintenance, has thus become a huge industry — where uniformed vultures prey on hapless taxi drivers. It is on the highways, roads, and in interior often narrow streets of Metro Manila where a profitable albeit invisible corruption by extortion takes place. The Metro Manila megalopolis is a concrete jungle where uniform, guns, mobile cars, and authority stand in hegemony that thousands of drivers need to grapple with in the daily grind of supporting their families to survive. This unspoken extortion, known for years and decades, breeds a language of corruption understandable mainly to both villain and victim.

Pakikisama

Why do cops and drivers alike resort to creating new words and articulating an entirely different language with meanings digressing from the more explicit or deliberate? Is this a way of avoiding conflict or escaping "dangerous" situations, as some of the drivers interviewed in this study claim? Or is creating other terms to mean the same thing simply a way to cope, adapt, and just go along with the status quo as expressed in various ways of pahiwatig (hint) and the time-valued pakikisama and pakikipagkapwa (cooperation and mutual sympathy) as conveyed by other key informants of this paper?

Filipino values such as *pakikisama*, *pakikipagkapwa*, *hiya* (shame), and *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude), and cultural practices like personalism that breed certain levels of patron-client relations within the political system can be seen from the perspective of political culture. Political culture helps determine the boundaries of permissible



political action. It defines the degrees and types of corruption as well as responses to corruption. A related variant value, "palusot" (to evade accountability) becomes a result of negotiation and transaction. In the end, after a series of sign exchange (words and/or hand/eye/hand expressions combined) between the predator and preyed, transaction is consummated and the commission of a crime is "nalusutan" (unaccountable).

Further, certain psychological and sociological concepts of adaptation, coping, and association as these relate to understanding what motivates the taxi drivers and the *kotong* cops, for example, to engage in these expressions to hide the evil act of bribery and other forms of corruption, can be partly explained by the theory of learning and communication.

Corruption-speak is a regular and functional language for both *kotong* cops and taxi drivers coupled frequently with a certain body movement like eyes and hands when they go out and ply the streets. The language of corruption is a form of sub-culture that nurtures and reinforces road extortion and the exploitation of hapless taxi drivers.

Metro Manila: Urban jungle of kotong cops

Valenzuela City, with its many factories along the North freeway, has 10 police blocks. Balintawak is notorious for its heavy traffic. Trucks going to Valenzuela usually take a shortcut route and risk paying extortion fees. In the toll gate at Hobard Village, a truck fetches for P10 daily. A day's collection here can total P7,000 to P10,000. The extortion is higher at night - P50 per truck so that "kotong" cops rake in P5,000 for a night of vigilant extortion.

Taxi drivers refer to the "kotong" cop as one who asks for "lagay" (bribe) or bribe from a driver who is apprehended for a traffic misdemeanor – whether real or concocted. All said they have daily experience with "kotong" cops everywhere in Metro Manila where they ply their route. In these encounters, taxi drivers engage in a brief conversation with the "kotong" cops especially when approached or flagged down while driving

Modus Operandi: Use of coded words

A taxi driver, Baja, talks about a modus operandi whenever he and other taxi drivers would experience being flagged down either by, aside from cops, the "Yellow Boys" referring to the MMDA, the "ALEC boys" referring to the LTO, and the "Metro boys" referring to the LTFRB. The MMDA is the Metro Manila Development Authority which is responsible for the observance of traffic rules; the LTO, on the other hand, handles registration of all vehicles; and the LTFRB is the Land Transportation Franchising Regulatory Board which takes care of franchising of public utility vehicles (PUVs) and accessories for operations such as taxi meters.

Baja regularly experiences dealing with "kotong" cops. The "Yellow Boys" usually come up to him and initiate a conversation. According to Baja, these cops habitually ask taxi drivers who are apprehended, "Kilala mo si Quezon?" and would issue immediately a ticket to which the taxi drivers would feel "obligado" or obligated to give a P200 bill. (The P200 bill features the face of former President Manuel Quezon).

Baja: Drivers especially of colorum taxis use a special code to avoid extortion. The "areglo" (deal) is actually prefixed by the colorum taxi operator who is obligated ("obligado") or compelled to pay P1,000 to the "Yellow boys" for every unit each month as "protection money." The operator gets a "receipt" acknowledging the payment.

He adds: If a Yellow boy approaches the driver should mention a special code to avoid giving money everytime he gets flagged down. Example is to give the name of the operator, 'It's OK with Sir Sampa' and then show the photocopy of receipt. The cop will get the message and leaves the driver alone.

But the problem is when he is apprehended by other law enforcers, such as "ALEC" (LTO), Baja must now show a different "receipt." If his supposed violation is defective registration plate or document, the LTO cop will tell him,

"Oh, pare, your registration is defective." This means he is obligated ("obligado") to shell out P500 or P200 because otherwise his license will be confiscated.

Other key informants / taxi drivers (Cruz, Santos, and Jamir) talk about a regular monthly "protection" fee of P500 to be given to "ALEC" (LTO) to avoid being accosted further by other law enforcers. For example, along Tandang Sora, whenever a "Yellow Boy" would approach them for a supposed violation, they only need to mention a special code - "Alec po ako" - to be recognized that the driver is "hawak ng LTO" (under LTO protection).

To taxi drivers, it is critical to know the use of "koda" (codes) that both they and policemen understand. Baja says, the fact alone that there are 7,000-10,000 colorum taxis in the whole of Metro Manila means "malaking kita" (big money) to "kotong" cops.

Getting away from entrapment

Three informants, Baja, Santos at Jamir, would often get entangled with law enforcers from the Yellow Boys company whenever they ply Philcoa to Tandang Sora. Rush hours find them being flagged down and approached by grinning Yellow Boys. "O, pare, nagmamadali ka. Hindi ka dapat tumawid kanina (cross the road). .. O sige, baka mahuli ka na nyan, UBE na lang." (O, pare, not so fast. You shouldn't have crossed the road...You might be caught. But OK, UBE will do.) To which the driver would try to negotiate, also with a smile and a scratch on the head, "Sir, pula-pula na lang ho, mahina pa eh." (Sir, I'll just give pula-pula. Not enough earnings yet.)

All key informants agree that many times, they manage to avoid "kotong" by constantly being on guard in areas of Metro Manila where they think "kotong" cops most likely would stand by for their prey. "We avoid going to such places swarming with "kotong" cops," they say.

The drivers' use of "UBE" and "pula-pula" in their exchange with the "kotong" cops is only one of the creative ways to avoid being entangled in bigger problems with the cops ("para makaiwas sa mas malaking problema"). Baja says taxi drivers generally do not want to earn the ire of the cops so they have to cooperate and give their "share" even if they know it is already "abuso."

"Ube" (or Ninoy Aquino which is worth P100) is what is normally asked from taxi drivers along Kamuning road, Quezon City very early in the morning. In other areas like Makati, "Ube" is "Yellow-1" and "pula-pula" is still P50, which is the only red bill around. Among fixers in government offices like the LTO, Ninoy Aquino bill is called "Zero-Zero."

A glossary and body language of extortion

According to Baja, *kotong* cops create the words themselves to convey a veiled threat so that taxi drivers are obligated ("obligado") to shell out money. Santos, Jamir, Lope, Cruz and Sison agree.

Baja remembers his first encounter with the police in 1996. While driving along Quezon avenue, a policeman accosted him for crossing an intersection without traffic lights. The policeman flagged him down and Baja asked, "Bakit po sir?" (Why, sir?) The policeman replied "Violation yan" (Violation) to which he replied, "alin po, sir?" (What violation, sir?)

Moments later, the policeman asked, "May kilala ka ba? Kilala mo si Osmena?" (You know somebody, do you know Osmena?) Being naïve at that time paid off, said Baja. After feigning ignorance about Osmena, the policeman, said, "O sige, pang- meryenda nalang, hindi mo pala kilala." (OK, you don't know him, snacks will do.) He understood readily what "pang-meryenda" meant and so he dished out P50 to the policeman who quickly let him go.



Semiotics offers the analysis of texts to dissect meanings or connotations. The term text usually refers to a message which has been recorded in some way, i.e. writing, audio, etc., so that it is physically independent of its sender-receiver. A text is an assemblage of signs such as words, images, sounds and/or gestures constructed and interpreted with reference to the conventions in a particular medium of communication.²

Along this line, Santos and Jamir tell of their experiences with cops on duty in Pasay City near the EDSA crossing. These cops creatively dramatize their behavior with words that would express a sense of urgency. Any keen observer would easily get the message.

Looking for passengers at the corner of Taft and EDSA one afternoon, Santos instead saw a policeman alight from a mobile car driven by another companion. The cop signaled Santos to park on the side. The driver thought it was going to be a simple and short exchange. After telling him that instead of slowing he should be driving fast since he was on the highway, the cop started walking to and fro in front of his taxi, appearing very busy with traffic.

Santos recalls: "Ayun ang pulis, palakad lakad sa harap ko habang naka-parada ako, hanggang sa maging obligado ka na magbayad. Yun ang ibig sabihin nun, palakad- lakad sa harapan mo, habang naghihintay sa iyo na madecipher mo ang ibig sabihin ng pulis." (That's it, the cop was walking to and fro in front of my taxi while parking on the side street – waiting for me to get the meaning.) After which he asked impatiently but in hushed tone, while approaching the driver: "Ano, okey na? May mga lakad pa kami" (Are you ready? We still have rounds to do) and walked toward his mobile car which was now parked further ahead of the taxi.

Santos, by instinct, got the cop's message, conveyed indirectly through the policeman's hurried body motions "palakad-lakad sa harapan mo"" coupled with the words, "ano okey ka na" spoken in impatient tone. The driver felt "obligated" to respond to the cop's overtures. Aware too that it was futile to dilly dally, and that time was not on his side, Santos quickly got down from his taxi and approached the mobile car where he tried to reason out once more but in the end, decided to hand over a P100 bill ("Ube") while saying, "pasensya na po, sir" (So sorry, sir).

On another occasion, Jamir passed by the same vicinity one early morning. A cop flagged him down, smiled, and greeted him "pang-Starbucks pare" (for Starbucks, pare) which he knew meant the cost of a cup of Starbucks coffee - usually about P150. Jamir, an amiable and known among his friends as an easy-to-get-along with person, was quick to reply, "Sir, wag Starbucks, mahina pa ngayon, instant na muna" (Sir, not Starbucks...got no earnings yet). The cop laughed and let him go scot-free. "Instant" means instant coffee which would sell anywhere between P5 and P10 a cup.

"Kaya nga importante maki-ride ka lang. Tawanan mo lang," another informant butts in. (Just ride along, laugh at it.)

Knowing body language is part of the driver's daily "survival kit." Body language is a form of non-verbal communication, which consists of body posture, gestures, facial expressions, and eye movements. Erring cops use any means to extort without being themselves caught (as there are also CCTVs in areas with heavy traffic) – and drivers should be alert when such theatrics take place.

In using corruption words, meanings are easily discerned; the transaction and communication between the sender and recipient – in this study, cops and taxi drivers - is consummated. The language of extortion constructs and maintains a daily reality. This is a principle of language and communication that is highlighted in the hidden subculture of corruption-speak in Metro Manila.

Lope tells of his nephew's initiation to the world of "kotong" in1998: A policeman asked him, "Si Osmena, di mo kilala?" (Do you know Osmena?) The nephew tried to reason out that he was new in the trade and replied, "Bago lang po ako sir" (I'm still new, sir) to which the policeman quickly retorted, "Si Quezon kilala mo?" (Quezon, you



know him?) The young driver, expressing apparent ignorance answered, "Hindi rin po, sir" (No, sir). The policeman, getting exasperated and piqued after failing to put his message across, made what he wanted more to the point: "Bigay mo na lang si Roxas, kung hindi, tiket na lang" (Just give Roxas or else you get a ticket). Lope, who was then sitting beside his nephew, volunteered to reply quickly, "Sir, pula pula na lang po, wala pa pong buena mano at pamangkin ko ito, baguhan lang, eh." (Sir, just "pula-pula", no first passenger's fee yet. The driver is my nephew and he really is a new cab driver.)

Cruz would never forget how a fellow driver was held up along CP Garcia in UP Diliman and later drove to the police in charge at Camp Karingal, Quezon City to report the crime. Lo and behold, he saw the holdup man inside and seemed to be taking it easy with some cops. "Tumahimik na lang ako" (I just kept quiet), Cruz says quoting his fellow driver who then just drove off.

When dealing with policemen sometimes drivers need to just keep quiet or forget about petty crimes victimizing them. Silence is an unwritten law in the police sector — especially so when there are strong suspicions of police involvement in crime incidents. "Ibig sabihin, importante tumahimik ka na lang. Ganyan yan, ang batas eh tumahimik ka na lang," the informants chorus. (Just keep quiet. That's what law is, stop talking.)

Use of codes: Pakikisama

It is important for taxi drivers to know the language of the policemen to be able to survive the street jungle and get along well with the powerful cops at every turf they control.

Fernando Galindes (not his real name), 43, a taxi driver for 12 years, says his life in the streets of Metro Manila has taught him how important "pakikisama" (cooperation or smooth human relationship), "pakikiramdam" or "paramdam" (being alert or sensitive), and "pahiwatig" (keen of signs) are in dealing with the "kotong" cops.

Other established norms

Baja philosophizes: "Kung maliit ang butones, maliit din ang ulahis. Malaki ang butones, malaki ang ulahis." In English, a small button should have a small hole, a big button should have a big hole to fit. But corrupt cops want to have a big button for a small hole - a metaphor for wanting to have more money to augment one's small salary as a cop in order to address his bigger personal needs – or greed.

Baja and the other taxi drivers agree that where extortion is worst like in Quezon City and Valenzuela, it pays to be creative and resourceful in avoiding *kotong* cops who expect drivers to regularly grease their palms as part of the accepted norms on the streets.

How to deal with "kotong" cops

The study's driver-informants summarize vital lessons in dealing with corrupt policemen – concepts shared in the sector of taxicab drivers, or for that matter, all PUV drivers and operators.

- "Kailangang mapanlikha tayo" (Be creative)
- "Makisama lang tayo" (Just go along, cooperate)
- "Wag sumimangot, bawal yan, baka pag-initan tayo" (Do not frown, frowning is taboo)
- "Gawa ka lang ng kwento kwento para malibang ang pulis" (Just make up a story)
- "Kailangang sabayan mo ang salita sa arte ng mata, at kamay." (You have to combine the right words with the appropriate movement or expression of the eyes and hands)
- "Kailangang mahusay kang gumamit ng salita, wag sisigaw, wag kang prangka." (You need to be good at using words, do not shout, do not be frank or direct when talking."
 - "Kaibiganin mo ang pulis" (Be friends with the police)



"Gamitin mo ang lengwahe nila" (Use their language)

"Wag mong bibistuhin, delikado yan, yari ka." (Do not expose them, that is a no-no, you'll be in trouble)

"Magbigay ka agad, wag ka nang magdahilan kung matigas yung kausap mo" (Give at once, no more philosophizing if the cop you are talking to is stubborn)

"Sabayan mo ng ngiti at kamot sa ulo, kung magbigay ka" (Give a smile and scratch your head once you decide to give)

"Kung di mo kaya ang presyo, kahit ube o pula-pula lang, pwede na." (If you cannot afford the price, just give a 100 peso bill (violet) or fifty peso bill (red)

"Dapat magaling ka dumiskarte para hindi ka mapaginitan" (Improvise so cops won't get back at you)

"Ang importante, pakikisama lang" (The important thing is you cooperate, just go along)

"Kung makakalusot ka sa kotong, gawin mo, makaisakay na lang sa gusto niya,"

"Simula ka Quezon (P20 <mark>bill) wag magpahalata na kaya mo si Ninoy (P500 bill) at baka um</mark>abot ka sa Trinaggulo" (P1000 bill)

The value of pakikisama is very apparent in the responses of the drivers. If pakikisama is effective, "medaling makalusot." They also give premium to being indirect in their language and being creative in dealing with the corrupt cops. In addition, are the acquired skill of smiling "innocently" and scratching one's head called artistic expressions too as part of avoiding conflict or "iwas" to antagonize the corrupt cops?

"Natututo na rin kaming umarte basta makakita kami ng kokotong sa amin," sighed Baja in exasperation.

Conclusion

The whole performance by the actors involved in political corruption in the streets —with their dialogue and action in real-life situation — shows the big potential of corruption speak as sources of artistic expressions to which future artists may want to expose themselves to and integrate to put into art form, maybe like the film which Siguion-Reyna has committed himself to doing in the future.

From a broader perspective, the findings give one a glimpse of other types of corruption that happen in the bigger transportation industry, in the highways and roads used by drivers, commuters, and passengers as they go about their daily grind — and by policemen and traffic enforcers tasked to make travel safe and orderly. There are, for instance, the scams about the road user's tax, freeway toll fees, corruption that taints road development projects, licensing of public and private vehicles, renewal of driver's licenses, and other sorts of anomalies. In all these, the victims are the civilians, taxpayers, commuters, as well as drivers and passengers of all types of vehicles.

The corruption that thrives in the clandestine transactions between *kotong* cops and taxi drivers is a microcosm of the endemic and systemic corruption that afflicts not only the national police force but the entire government bureaucracy. There is no dearth of studies and other literature in the Philippines pointing to how government corruption has become institutional: The patronage that defines the relationship between the presidency, on the one hand, and legislators and local executives on the other; the use of the authority derived from elective and appointive positions to promote personal and family aggrandizement; the billions of pesos of public wealth gone to waste because of malfeasance; the structure of corruption that connects not only national and local government units but also the military and police, business, media, and other sectors including the Catholic church hierarchy; and a justice system that seems to be part of the problem.

The power that a policeman wields defines the relationship that allows the persistence of the *kotong* culture in Metro Manila – and elsewhere in the country. Just as corruption in the whole bureaucracy is veiled in euphemisms, and other phrases or idioms (see *Corruptionary* book) the same language – and more – becomes the medium of communication, negotiation, and subjugation between the policeman and his hapless victims. Those who have access to power also enjoy the hegemony of language that is crafted for the abuse of power itself. The political structure defines and sustains the sub-culture of domination at this level.

Roland Tolentino³ agrees that the culture of corruption is most widely experienced in the police institution. In particular this institutional corruption affects drivers and all walks of life. Citing the *Corruptionary* book, the language that has evolved from this malaise includes such terms as, aside from "kotong cop," "chocolate boys," "flying squad," "hulidap" (holdup), "highwayman," "kay Hepe" (for the Boss), and "pulis patola" (another term for kotong cop).

"It is in its nature that corruption is hidden yet it is an open secret, something that is illegal yet proliferates clandestinely...It is spoken about only in whispers so as not to rock the status quo. Hence, the recourse to codes and signs to convey meanings." Tolentino says.

It is precisely because it is unwritten and practiced extensively in hidden forms that the sub-culture of *kotong* cops prevails or is reinforced. Elaborating on this point, language scholar Melania Abad calls the corruption words as social codes, in a broader sense all semiotic codes are "social codes" verbal language (phonological, syntactical, lexical, prosodic and paralinguistic subcodes), that express and satisfy certain needs.⁴ The corruption-speak in the sub-society of policemen and taxi drivers allows the victims themselves to analyze the entrails of this type of corruption.

"Ube, pula-pula, Quezon, Ninoy, Trianggulo, dilaw; tong-pats, bukol, ipit, regalo, areglo, ayos; biyak-biyak, chichi, cut, balato, cash gift..." The list is endless. The list continues to grow. The performance of the lead stars, the "kotong" cops and the drivers in the streets of Metro Manila with their colorful dialogues and real-life acting develops and continues to attract its own followers and audience. There is no ending in sight... for now. But change, there should be.

END NOTES

¹ Using the definition of Ferdinand de Saussure, "A sign is the basic unit of language (a given language at a given time). Every language is a complete system of signs." Writings in General Linguistics, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

³ Kulturang Popular ng Korapsyon Bilang Panlipunan at Pang-Araw-Araw na Mobilidad, ni Rolando B. Tolentino, para sa National Study Conference cum Festival on Corruption: A Cultural Innovation for Good Governance, CenPEG, December 2008, UP Diliman, Quezon City.

² Ferdinand de Sausurre, Ibid

⁴ Melania Abad, Interview on Corruption Words as Social Codes. September 3, 2009