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# ART STUDIES JOURNAL

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# Is Folk Fine?: An Ambi-valent Introduction

by Patrick D. Flores

The desire of Philippine scholarship to locate and appropriate the specific cultural locus of the truly and distinctly Philippine and Filipino has taken forked paths. On the one hand, there are the attempts by some quarters in both local and international academe to recapture the lost eden of Philippine culture by recuperating from the colonial memory the putatively pristine stories of the indigene, the allegedly unadulterated tales of the native that had been subjected to the epistemic violences of the imperialist apparatus. On the other, there are the efforts that problematize precisely this very programmatic and the rhetoric/analytic which has informed and continues to inform the theoretical enterprise.

It is against this background of options that the *Art Studies Journal* emerges. For its premiere issue, it seeks to rethink the terms with which the category folk has been formulated. Implicated in this thematics, to be sure, are the contentious problematics underlying the concepts of the identity and ethnicity of the Philippine, and inevitably of the Filipino nation.

Alden Q. Lauzon's *Folk Activities as Minority Practice: A Post-Colonial Response* zeroes in straightaway on how traditional humanist scholarship has fossilized the study of folk production/practice by merely appraising it in terms of its formalistic and, well, folkloristic aspects. Lauzon posits that this perspective has failed to historicize the folk and therefore has ineluctably become complicit to the orientalist agenda of naturalizing the assignations and interests of othering and worlding. The Manichaeian aesthetic is thus affirmed here and employed to underpin the essentialized distinctions between cultures, colonialist and colonized.

Lauzon, however, teases out the more fundamental theoretical basis on which a certain orthodox formulation of culture builds its premise. He contends, proceeding from Antonio Gramsci as interpreted by Raymond Williams, that culture is not a homogenous, unitary, and fixed body of practices, but rather a decentered and fragmentary assemblage of conflicting and contradictory discourses. It is this position that finally leads Lauzon to take issue with Ricarte Puruganan's assertion that "(a)rtists could involve themselves in this significant venture into the more lofty aspirations of our race, into the search for the very substance of our being, and our new society, into the realization of our national identity in terms of our art."



Lauzon insists that the notion of culture operative in Puruganan's appeal is no longer tenable and sustainable. According to Lauzon:

*But what race? What being? Whose identity? Of course, it is valid for Puruganan to call for a contextualization of exogenous "influences," but apparently he still harbors this convoluted notion of culture as a monolithic empire. But... Philippine Culture is a differentiated and decentered terrain just like any other... It should not be singularized, but rather pluralized so that it is possible to speak of Philippine cultures: the culture of the ethnic peoples like the Itnegs, T'bolis, Manobos; the urban/popular cultures of the metropolises of Manila, Cebu, Davao; the folk/rural culture of Basey, Paete, Pakil, Taal; the minority cultures of the various Muslim communities dispersed throughout the archipelago.*

He qualifies though that this pluralism must be interrogated in the context of Third World/Post-Colonial conditions. Lauzon quotes Abdul Jan Mohamed and David Lloyd: "The semblance of pluralism disguises the perpetuation of exclusion, in so far as it is enjoyed only by those who have already assimilated the values of the dominant culture. For this pluralism, ethnic or cultural difference is merely an exoticism, an indulgence which can be relished without in any significant way, modifying the individual who is securely embedded in the protective body of dominant ideology."

Lauzon's essay, hence, substantially puts under siege conservative construals of folk, culture, folk culture, as well as their precursorial/derivative terms/categories, deconstructing their theoretical language by confronting them with a crisis, precisely, against them/selves, so that they may ache under the tension of predicament.

To further prove that the folk can never be romanticized as distilled quint/essence or elixir, Norma A. Respicio's *The Rise and Fall of the Textile Weaving Tradition of*

*the Itnegs of Northern Luzon, Philippines* demonstrates that tradition, the supposed cornerstone of culture, is not invulnerable to the historical constraints of capital and power relations. She relates, for instance, that Itneg weaving has practically unravelled down to its last thread because of various factors:

*It is recalled that the Itnegs had resisted western control and domination. They strongly resisted Spanish proselytization and administrative control. The Americans who used more sophisticated methods of colonization (establishment of schools and intensification of market economy) were also regarded with distrust by the Itnegs. The Itnegs showed their abhorrence by clinging more ardently to their beliefs and traditions. Unfortunately these native stubbornness and pride did not withstand the intense assaults of world war. In pursuit of the retreating Japanese Imperial Forces, the American bombers razed Abra to the ground. This resulted to the complete paralyzation of the agrarian economy, as lands became barren and untillable. Cultural materials (textile weaves and weaving implements) were all reduced to ashes.*

*As a result of the war, the Itnegs had nothing to cling to. They had completely lost their cultural materials that bolstered their identity as a people. Hands down, the whole Itneg native superstructure was feasted upon by market economy (with a monopoly capitalist character), unleashed with full force by the Americans. The Itnegs just like the rest of the Filipino populace were helpless under the semi-colonial system running roughshod over the incapacitated rice-based agrarian society. Cash and profit were all that mattered. Two-three rice croppings were introduced; cash crops like Virginia tobacco and garlic replaced cotton; and the public markets were flooded with factory-processed textiles from the United States.*

*With the change to market economy, the rites, beliefs, and practices in the formerly wholly rice-based agrarian Itneg*



*economy became irrelevant. Textile weaving, too, became obsolete for it was too arduous an endeavor to gain cash for. Moreover, with the altered agricultural cycle, rituals, textile weaves used in rituals along with the design patterns/motifs completely lost their significance.*

Verily, succeeding studies on Itneg weaving can no longer afford to neglect the issues foregrounded by Respicio. In appraising productions such as weaves, they will have to take into account matters such as mode of production, relations of production, and other social imperatives which compromise and vitiate, as it were, the authenticity and identity of the folk; and treat the aforementioned equations not as extraneous "outworks of the text," but rather the crucial pressures that intimately inform and determine the very form of the artifact itself, including its very capacity to signify/symptomize the society whence it had sprung. With this, Respicio's account virtually prefigures an incipient materialist analysis of folk art, thus offering in the final analysis an alternative metaphor/narrative to the neo-canonical trope of folk as a vestal virgin raped by a ruthless marauder and therefore must be purged of the stains of the enemy's sin to appear worthy again in the eyes of the gods.

Respicio's contribution in a way inaugurates, too, a possible shift in the theory of the folk. For one, it is able to account for certain transformations in culture, explaining these changes as possible breaks, say, in social arrangements or realignments, perhaps, in academic epistemes, and definitely not as the result of the apostasy of an ungrateful people who have irrevocably sold out to corporatist/conglomerate capital and thus party to the perpetration and perpetuation of their "damaged culture."

**The Dissipation of Folk Art**, Ana Maria Theresa P. Labrador's treatise on the dissi-

pation of cultural products referred to by the Philippine artworld as folk, clues us into the manner in which culture moves — in the same way that money changes hands. Labrador ably lays bare the intricate traffic of this dispersion by discussing salient topics such as the effect of money economy to hand-woven textiles, scholarship and the plunder of Philippine material culture, the economic realities of the market for Philippine folk art, and the ethics of acquisition of folk art. Labrador cites a case:

*A contributory factor in the dissipation of folk art is the rampant acquisition perpetuated by museums, collectors, and dealers. The degree of amassing other people's material culture depends on the price of the objects and scholarly interest. It is as if fashion dictated acquisition.*

*Philippine objects are very popular among North American, German, and French markets. This popularity bears a direct relation to the countries's academic interest and the number of scholars involved in the field of Philippine ethnography. The problem of unabated plunder is worsened, perhaps unknowingly, by scholarship, which instigates world prices for specific folk art or antiquity.*

The importance of Labrador's effort lies in its ability to reconstruct the significant nodes, circuits, and intersections through which objects pass as they move in and out of categories constructed by the artworld. These institutions, we will find out, include the academe, the local and international museum/gallery network, the cultural agencies of the State, private business, and tourism.

Pearl Tan-Punongbayan's *The Pahiyas in Lucban, Quezon: A Preliminary Study* for its part problematizes how the *pahiyas* has been valued as and conferred the status of folk art. She theorizes that:

*(The) claim that the pahiyas is "folk art" is*



based largely on an induced phenomenon which is consistent with the prevailing system of institutionalizing art and a relatively recent system of appropriating cultural practices and artifacts. On one hand, the artworld has extended the domain of art to absorbing what used to be generally regarded as ethnographic materials and classifying them under "folk art," at times even "elevating" them to "fine art." On the other hand, ethnologists, folklorists, and cultural anthropologists have seriously pursued interest in the aesthetic values/significance of cultural artifacts and practices. The wealth of literature concerning the convergence or divergence of art and anthropology written since the turn of the century up to the present attests to the surge of interest in the relation between aesthetic objects and anthropological objects.

Tan-Punongbayan further claims that the arthood of the *pahiyas* hinges on the aesthetic rationale based on what was perceived to be folk or, better yet, folksy by the tourism apparatus of Ferdinand Marcos's New Society. The elaborate decorations of the facades, which only began to preponderate under the aegis of the New Society, were used to justify the aesthetic and folkloric status of the *pahiyas*. Tan-Punongbayan thus spurs a problematic:

Roces's *pahiyas* as "folk art" is based on the New Society *pahiyas* and may still be applicable to the present *pahiyas* as far as the manner of celebrating the occasion is concerned. Whether or not the same can be said of the pre-New Society *pahiyas* is, however, another question which needs further consideration. At least two reasons are pertinent to this consideration: one, the elaborate decorations proliferated only from the New Society period onwards, hence the simple *pahiyas* of the pre-New Society may not count as art in this respect. This, of course, does not disregard the fact that the very notion of the *pahiyas* at its earliest stage was potentially aesthetic, no matter how undeveloped it was; two, it may be legitimate to consider the pre-New Society *pahiyas* as "folk art" on the basis of its being a ritual alone, i.e., without considering

the presence or absence of aesthetic features.

Tan-Punongbayan's disquisition at its most useful makes possible an inquiry into the construction of the aesthetic as an institutional imperative of the artworld to legitimate its existence and its power to speak for others.

Finally, Flaudette May V. Datuin's *Re-thinking the Folk: An/Other View* questions the strategies/tactics currently employed by feminist visual artist with regard to the appropriation of folk in contemporary art-making. She begins by stating that one of today's prevalent feminist critical and artistic practices "urges a 'return to the source,' thus privileging the 'folk' and the 'indigenous' as the 'unsung province' of women's art activity. This strategy challenges the dominant male-centered artistic production by advancing a counter-tradition and a redefinition of art."

Datuin, however, critiques the rigor in the gesture:

...constructing a counter-canon falls into several traps, one of which is the essentialist notion that women are inherently creative, and are therefore worthy of recognition. Once we get recognized for the worthy "artists" that we are, what next? We will either exist and produce separately according to a new canon of literary and artistic mothers, in which case a new version of a hegemonic order will be put in place; or we get grudgingly assimilated into the current, patriarchal hegemony, while it remains gloriously intact. Our artistic production will merely be one of the various other forms of expression existing side by side with the dominant art forms. In the hierarchy of discourses, however, our texts will remain at the bottom, categorized as "women's art," "exotic," "indigenous," "native," "folk" or "folk-inspired."



What Datuin proposes to her fellow feminists is to reterritorialize, to relocate not in a room of one's own, but, in the words of Caren Kaplan, in "a place with room for what can be salvaged from the past and what can be made new...we gain reterritorialization; we inhabit a world of our making where 'our' is expanded to a coalition of identities."

Judith Barry and Sandy Flitterman, writing in "Textual Strategies: The Politics of Art Making," elaborates Datuin's main theses. Barry and Flitterman identify four approaches to feminist art-making today. For the purposes of this journal, it would be useful to refer to their reading of a kind of women's art which takes the form of sub-cultural resistance, one that presents a kind of artisanal work that recovers crafts and previously neglected skills. Barry and Flitterman look at this as an essentialist position inasmuch as "it views women as having an inherent creativity that simply goes unrecognized by mainstream culture. It therefore has limited ability to transform the structural conditions which both produce definitions of 'art' and oppress women. This is not to say that this kind of art-making is unimportant, but simply to point out the limitations of an untheorized strategy."

The aspiration, therefore, of feminists, to invest themselves with specificity as "women" and as "natives" cannot be anchored on a pre-patriarchal herstory or a matriarchal universe. The feminist praxis must ultimately reckon with the overdetermination of subjectivity and discourse, seize the strategic positionings of radical politics, and at the same time grapple with the exigencies of *differance*. It is only at this unnerving conjuncture where a tenable praxiology of ethnocentric utopia (feminist, Philippine, feminist Philippine) can be efficaciously effected and operationalized.

The theoretical and political ramifications of the terms/categories ethnic, folk, indigenous, native, traditional, subaltern, and even autochthonous implicate the multiple suppositions that validate the kind of academic productions on Philippine culture circulating in academe for quite some time now. The arena of debate has undoubtedly widened and the struggle to valorize the most feasible assumption has become more passionate. The terrain, in short, has become a veritable minefield: there is no final word on the matter as of yet.

What this journal just recommends is the circumspection not to fall into the essentialization and hypostasis of the native/nativ-ity as to ambiguate altogether the basically heterological, heteroglossic, and heterogenous circumstantialities of its construction. It is also significant to note that to conceive of the dominant as the all-powerful master (Patriarchy, West, Canon, Capital) and the Other as the all-powerless slave is to decidedly occlude the optic of the theoretical possibilities preconditional for the dialectical exchanges between domination and resistance, displacement and affiliation/identification, mastery and forgetting, loss and recovery, disruption and memory and change.

In "Ethnic Identity and Post-Structuralist Differance," R. Radhakrishnan talks about the dialectical oscillations between ethnic and identity, between specificity and difference:

*The constituency of "the ethnic" occupies quite literally a "pre-post"-erous space where it has to actualize, enfranchise, and empower its own 'identity' and coextensively engage in the deconstruction of the very logic of 'identity' and its binary and exclusionary politics. Failure to achieve this doubleness can only result in the formation of ethnicity as yet another 'identical' and hegemonic structure.*



The Art Studies Journal treads this ground quite perilously and precariously. It does not pretend to ask and answer the question "What is/What is not folk?" as the ensuing polemics could only reproduce the metaphysical profundities of nativist humanism. It also does not claim to address the problem of what constitutes the folk/folkloric (theme, subject matter, elements, feeling, sensibility): the hypothesis could only set us back to formalist technicism and pure aesthetics. Simply put, the journal deliberately does not ransack the so-called uniquely Philippine/Filipino of its a priori Philippine-ness/Philippinicity which supposedly suscitates a peculiarly Pinoy "experience," "expression," "spirit," "image," or "style." This inaugural volume defamiliarizes the term and reformulates/refunctions the ideological premises on which it was built and has assumed authority, resisting in the bravest way possible the convenience of erasing the messy interpellations and the intertextual intersections of overlapping discourses produced by the struggles among Philippine society's residual, dominant, and emergent formations and their constituencies.

Finally, the discourse of/on the folk inexorably coheres and coalesces with the discourse of the Filipino as collective agency and subject-position, an epistemic strategy that can only impel revolutionary transformation by disseminating the nation across the overdeterminations of subjectivity and desire.

\*There have been tentative or working definitions of the folk: the folk as lowland Christian (in which there is no Muslim/Moro folk?); the folk as confluence of Latin and Southeast Asian/Malay/Indigenous "influences"; the folk as some sort of cultural lingua franca "spoken" by ethnolinguistic/regional territories (e.g. Cordillera folk art); the folk as *sining bayan* produced and practised by the community

(Are mass-mediated texts therefore folk inasmuch as they are produced and practised by the "people," too? Is there such thing as urban folk?); the folk as distillation of the *panitayong pananaw* or *tatak Pilipino*, which by the way are also just constructs of the Filipino as subject-in-process.