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Re-thinking the Folk: An/Other View

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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 through a counter-tradition and a redefinition of art. Weaving, embroidery, jewelry, and mat-making traditions of the Cordillera, Mindanao, Iloilo, Malate, the Ilocos Region, Samar and Leyte among others, are cited as evidence that "contrary to the general conception, there has never been any lack of women artists in the Philippines." (Guillermo 1991a: 1) Foregrounded, too, are the efforts of "women artists" in the "fine arts" like Araceli Dans, Paz Abad-Santos, Brenda Fajardo, Norma Belleza, Ofelia Gelvezon-Tequi, Imelda Cajipe-Endaya, and Ana Fer, whose works take inspiration from the representations, imageries, and practices of their "folk," "indigenous," and "traditional" sisters.

Aside from recuperating skills that have long been subject to institutional forgetting, the construction of a counter-tradition also involves a re-discovery and reconstruction of a Philippine herstory. Rosalinda Pineda-Ofreneo, for instance, advocates the tracing of a "hidden tapestry" in Philippine history. Along with writers like Marjorie Evasco, Fe Mangahas, and Thelma Kintanar, she invokes the babaylan or catalonan as evidence of the equal and relatively high status enjoyed by women in pre-Spanish times.

In her chants as she presided over the rituals of the community, in her supplications as she led in the worship of various gods, in her 'possession' as she assumed their persona may be found the early beginning of poetry and drama. More than this, she possessed great power in the community, for she was versed in the art of healing. Besides being priestess and healer, she was the arbiter of culture and took charge of all the theoretical knowledge about nature. As one historian notes, she was the first "expert" on the social sciences and humanities in Philippine society. (Kintanar 1992:2)

According to Evasco, women should reclaim the babaylan's heritage by going deeper into racial memory and imagination; they must possess a mythic consciousness so that they might "connect with the great tap root of their ancient mothers." (Evasco 1992:1)

Reviving forgotten skills and texts are valid and important to the feminist project because it deconstructs the ideological binarisms of art/not-art; high art/low art; fine art/folk art. The center is decentered and seized, the marginal is purged of its marginality, and the "natural" is exposed as actually "unnatural," and therefore cultural and ideological.

However, constructing a counter-tradition and 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.

As Abdul Jan Mohamed and David Lloyd put it, the construction of a counter-canon merely exposes what they call "minority discourses" to an *asymmetrical assimilation* -- that is, while minority discourses get assimilated by the dominant canon, they "are always obliged, in order to survive, to master the hegemonic culture "without thereby necessarily gaining access to the power that circulates within the dominant sector." (*Cultural Critique* 6, 1987: 9, my emphasis) Assimilation, aside from being asymmetrical, is also selective, that is, the less threatening forms and elements of minority discourse are selected, while the more politically effective elements, like the struggle for political and economic survival, for instance, are muted, silenced, and even banned. Textiles from the Cordillera, for instance, may have gained respectability among the rich and famous, but the Kalingas's struggle for continued stewardship of the land of their ancestors is conveniently set aside, forgotten, or glossed over. As the preoccupation with the "exotic" takes

center stage, the minorities continue to be manipulated economically, politically, and socially. Meanwhile, forms of their discourse are themselves instruments for creating a semblance of tolerance -- a pluralism which only disguises, legitimizes, and perpetuates their continued exclusion; their gender, class, ethnic, and other forms of discrimination; and more importantly, their economic exploitation, social manipulation, ideological domination, and political disenfranchisement. Thus, minority discourses, as Jan Mohamed and Lloyd put it, are made to perform a "major" function -- that of the affirmation of a universal depoliticized humanity, while the system which perpetuates this exploitation is legitimized by the very minority discourse that the dominant culture selectively assimilates.

In this set-up, minority discourses, while they appear to have gained access to the canon, remain at the bottom of the hierarchy. Their texts exist as one among many, categorized as "women's art," "exotic," "indigenous," "native," "folk" or "folk-inspired." Thus, when we refer to ourselves as "women artists," "women writers," "poetesses," "sculptresses," we merely affirm our place in the bottom of the structure. We are "women artists," a category distinct from "artists." When we refer to our sisters as "folk" and "native," we merely re-inforce their otherness -- they are different from "us," the lowland Christian women. They need a label, and we do not. They are "indigenous" and we just are, period. Meanwhile, they remain economically and politically marginalized,

This is one reason why a mere appropriation of "folk" styles by women in the "fine arts" also has diminished possibilities. In fact, using these styles and imageries usually result, not with a bang, but with a whimper.

For instance, while Araceli Dans's *Calado Series* suggests a celebration of fe-

male creativity through embroidery, old laces, flowers, and reed baskets; it is not feminist. "It is also impossible," as Guillermo says, "to ignore their underlying class connotation, that of the domestic amenities of the *ilustrado* class."

And although Norma Belleza adopts the *bulol* imagery through a cubist structuring, generalized, rustic folk imageries, and folk colors, she nevertheless falls into the trap of re-presenting women in their traditional roles. And despite Magsaysay-Ho's rustic rendition of women and women's sisterhood, she traps them into the perpetual category of *the Other*, where women are romanticized and isolated into a "sisterhood."

And while Brenda Fajardo challenges the dominant classical/academic mode of representation through her folk/popular figuration, I nevertheless object to her use of tarot card as frame for Philippine and Filipinized images. Although Guillermo feels that the tarot card imageries are not interpretations of "inexorable destinies but options, and, even more so, as *dramatis personae* in history, past and present," the tarot immobilizes men and women into a frame, suggesting that they are interpellated and created by history, rather than the other way around. History and myth are juxtaposed, thus denying history of its materiality.

The same principle of recontainment applies to the early texts of Imelda Cajipe-Endaya, whose winding sheets and *sawalis* only serve as bondages, from which women cannot escape.

Even more dangerously, recovering the past exposes it to commodity fetishization and exoticization-- a possibility that Marian Pastor-Roces warns us of in the introduction of her book on Philippine textiles (*Sinaunang Habi*, 1991):

From the perspective of a painfully-crystallizing nationalism, it is thought that Philippine textiles and other native arts might speak in behalf of an old, beautiful collective Self, woefully unaffirmed. To the international museum and collector circuit, a book on the subject will affirm the post-colonial wonderment at the survival of concealed universes, but also of the continuing imperial reach of the world's dominant cultures, accessing ever newer worlds, more things to possess. Dealers, engaged in their own enterprise of translation, will want of such a book, information, translatable into good business. (Roces 1991: 9)

This is what happened, for instance, to the art of embroidery, which according to Guillermo flourished in the nineteenth century because of the demand for exquisitely ornamented liturgical vestments which were an important part of colonial art. In the mid-nineteenth century, embroidery became an important feature of the native blouse and barong tagalog worn by an emerging *ilustrado* class. Today, one sees the coming of age of Patis Tesoro barongs with their exquisite embroidery, with no less than the First Lady Amelita Ramos as patron.

Aside from commodification, there exists a more damaging possibility -- that of the cooptation of tradition for concrete, imperializing strategies. As Guillermo asserts:

Kung sa isang banda ay sinisikap nating bigyan ng panibagong sigla ang ating mga katutubong tradisyon at iugnay ito sa kasalukuyang karanasan upang mag-ambag sa pagsulong ng progresibong kilusan tungo sa makabuluhang pagbabago. sa kabilang banda nama'y may mga dayuhang pinangungunahan ng mga maka- imperyalistang Amerikano at tinutulungan ng mga lokal na intelektuwal na masusing humihimay sa ating kultura at mga tra disyon upang makagawa ng angkop na istratohiyang magtataguyod sa interes ng mga naghaharing uri. (Guillermo 1991b:5)

Guillermo cites the foregrounding of women as *Dios Ina*, *Mahal na Ina* or *Inang Bayan* in Consolacion Alaras's *Pamathalaan: Pagbubukas sa Tipan ng Mahal na Ina*, as an example of academic legitimation of an ideological distortion of traditional culture. Alaras says:

Kung may nakikita ng tanda ang tipan ng Mahal na Ina sa larangan ng pananampalataya at simbahan gayun din naman sa pulitika. Ang matatawag na Milagro sa EDSA noong Pebrero 1986 ay nagpapatotoo sa kamay ng Diyos na pumapatnubay sa bayang pinagpala na ito. Sa kauna-unahang pagkakataon, naranasan ng bayan ang isang Damayan na pinangungunahan ng pangulo ng bansa - Mrs. Corazon Cojuangco Aquino. (Guillermo 1991b: 10)

In this conflation of history, myth, and religion, Aquino's 'total war' and other policies are not only legitimized; history, Guillermo says, is also mystified. It is as if history had no material basis — all it does is follow a divine script directed by a powerful deity, female or otherwise. "Kung ito man ay iskrip," Guillermo muses, "baka hindi naman hulog ng langit kundi galing sa Washington..."

It would be terribly naive for us, therefore, to rejoice in finding a female God, a female priestess and a female president in our midst. Thus, when Joi Barrios uses the *babaylan's* ritual in her play *Damas de Noche*, she does not go too far. After the celebration of womanhood in the altar of sisterhood, what next? Do I lash out at the males for oppressing me and for getting in the way of my development? Or do I turn my back on them and create a separate world where women and female creative force reign supreme?

Inhabiting another world would not change this world. Going "animist" *alababayan* will only result in a reversal of roles, and *not* in a qualitative and meaningful change in the structure and power relations within.

The quest for a paradise lost also betrays an inadequate theory of culture, which is seen as a static product of a universal, linear structure, very much like that of the Levi-Straussian myths.

There is a past, present and future, and things, ideas, habits, systems are thought to evolve through time, through a perpetual striving for a kind of quintessential state... archeology and anthropology, seem almost like history, in that data is similarly arranged in terms of beginning, middle and end; and peoples are judged primitive (though no longer a respectable word), developing or complex. (Roces 1991: 10)

F. Landa Jocano, for instance, would propose three periods in Philippine archeological history: Formative, Incipient, and Emergent. Wilhelm G. Solheim II proposed four: Archaic, Incipient Filipino, Formative Filipino, and Established Filipino. Both proposals not only subscribe to history's linear progression; it finds an intertext with Darwin's concept of biological evolution "where quantum leaps of growth are marked by new abilities to do new things in new ways with new tools."

This faith in history's elegant march towards a future, plus the seemingly inevitable globalization of the world's village, are two of the main reasons for the impulse to recover tradition before they are irretrievably lost. Thus, feminists would propose a return to an innocent, glorious past, a paradise lost of *babaylans*, textile and basket weavers, female Gods and priestesses; and appropriate them for their own liberative project.

Without realizing it, this "master (the use of the sexist term is deliberate) plan" falls into the Darwinian trap of essentializing history. For instead of a tidy linear evolution from primitive to civilized states, history is a rich tapestry of inter-weaving so-

cial formations. It is possible, for instance, for different modes of production to exist side by side — the rural areas may be predominantly semi-feudal and the urban centers may be semi-capitalistic; sedentary rice agriculture may exist alongside earlier technologies like slash-and-burn; orature still persists despite print literature. In much the same vein, Philippine pre-history might not be that innocent or pristine before the colonizers came. In fact, some historians would assert that the seeds of feudalism were already beginning to take hold, despite the reign of the babaylan.

Thus, enshrining the past as pure "Filipino" and looking towards our "folk," "ethnic" sisters as "authentic" relics of the past who must be rescued from oblivion would be tantamount to equating them with exotic museum pieces, open to dissection, categorization, and experimentation.

Instead of falling into this essentialist trap, I suggest that our strategy of retrieving the "folk" should always be mediated by theory and must be subject to sustained theoretical critique. Such a theory would guard against recuperation for its own sake or for the sake of racial or gender pride, that is, productions of say, women and ethnic peoples are viewed as essentially "good" and must therefore be recognized by the mainstream culture. Instead of invoking and valorizing the folk as *a priori* essences of ethnicity and gender, from which we can derive our "lost" identity, our purpose in retrieving these minoritized discourses must be to critique and challenge dominant canons and theory and to break out of the ideological encirclement of universal humanism.

While it is important that we return to our source, the agenda is not to stay in it and remain immobilized. Instead, as Caren Kaplan says, we must locate ourselves, not in a room of one's own, but a "place with room for what can be salvaged from the past

and what can be made new. What we gain in reterritorialization; we inhabit a world of our making where 'our' is expanded to a coalition of identities." (Kaplan 1987: 195)

Reterritorialization does not entail a mere "relocation" to a world of our making, and that 'our' merely refers to 'women' and a sisterhood of women. Although sisterhood is important, we should also be cognizant of our differences and subject-positions. We should, for instance, remember that our concerns as middle-class lowland Christian women may be different from the problems of our sisters in the Cordillera. A mere adoption of their imageries and styles would gloss over the specificities of the cultures from which they sprang. Instead of merely "lifting" and romanticizing these forms as relics from the lost past, we should instead understand the artistic and economic modes of production, the political and aesthetic ideologies that gave rise to these forms. We then proceed to re-semanticize them for our own feminist project.

For instance, in the papier-mache and woodcarving industry of Paete, it is the males who carve wood, including the molds from which women and children produce their *takas*. Creation is a male domain, while copying or re-production is female. Cajipe-Endaya, herself a native of Paete, then proceeds to use *taka* dolls as found objects to expose issues of, say, mail-order brides, oppressed wives, etcetera. She thus seizes the creative power from male hands and at the same time "rescues" the *takas* from merely being ornamental pieces destined for export markets.

However, re-semanticization of the *taka* for Endaya's purposes is not enough. We should not also forget that the males from which she seizes the creative power are as oppressed as the women. Urging the women of Paete to produce the designs and molds themselves would result in equality between the sexes, yes, but the same op-

pressive structure would remain. Perhaps, creative power is not the issue, but the concept of power itself.

In other words, our concerns should not only be gender-specific; we should also take other factors into consideration: ethnicity, class, caste, age, religion, sexual preference, etcetera. This implies that the struggle must necessarily transcend the boundaries of the academic, the cultural, and the artistic. For the struggle is not being waged at the level of discourses alone. Neither is it being waged merely to effect a change in cultural and artistic practices, but to effect *concrete and radical transformations of material structure and exploitation*. In short, it is the women's task to strive, along with the men, towards a system where both men and women will no longer be oppressed.

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