

Re-Imaging Embodied Indigeneity: Footnotes from a Festival Pilgrimage in the Visayan Philippine Islands

Walking on the concrete path originally paved for automobiles (now inverted as a pedestrian mall with vendors peddling everything from homemade masks to buttered ears of corn to made-in-china toy guns, and more), a swarm of hundred bodies skin covered in black mud dance in



Figure 1 Tribu Panayaan, winner of Best Costume in Dinagyang Festival 2019, aesthetically re-imagine native, settler and colonial histories of island encounters. (Iloilo City, Iloilo)

synchronous rhythm and unison chants. Some, donned in feathered headdresses, flash my memory back to the Aztec temples of Teotihuacan in modern day Mexico. Others, wearing Afro wigs and straw regalia, remind me of African tribes said to have inspired the recent *Black Panther* blockbuster film. Ahead of these blackface dancers, a team of t-shirted volunteers transport banners from commercial sponsors who contributed to the production of this public spectacle. Irrespective of their precise origins or allegiances, in mass, they appear as an impressive tribe of indigenous warriors. As they turn the corner to take the “stage” (a major street intersection in the downtown area), a kaleidoscopic burst of multiple costume, prop and set transformations stuns viewers into virtual submission; a thousand years of native, colonial and imperial histories collapse in thirteen minutes of ecstatic street dance.

This is the 50th Dinagyang Festival in Iloilo City, one of the

largest regional festivals in the Philippines, which commemorates the arrival of settler Malay princes on Panay island originally inhabited by native negrito Atis, as well as colonial Spanish conquest and consequent introduction of Santo Nino (baby Jesus) into the devotional iconography of Philippine peoples. Dinagyang is one among hundreds of municipally organized festivals in the Philippine islands which fill up the calendar year in nonstop carnival celebrations of place, space, heritage, history, memory centered around street performance, dance and theater. While anthropologists of dance and ritual have published extensive ethnographic research from

site-specific festivals, I will consider how the media network of Visayan island festivals build on imperial legacies of institutional structures, as well as anti-imperial culture that appropriates indigeneity by engaging “community-based” participatory performance as a technology for postcolonial governance in local and national politics. I argue that even within these entangled media ecologies, the festival network of cultural performance enables imminent conditions for intersectional indigenous solidarities.

Moving away from a nationalist to local framework,¹ this paper analyzes the cultural phenomenon of Philippine local festivals from a specifically Visayan perspective. Visayas is composed of a central island chain within the nation-state archipelago, whose population is composed of multiple Bisayan dialects. Prior to Magellan’s arrival on the Visayan island of Cebu, these island territories witnessed centuries of cultural influence from Chinese, Japanese, Malay, Tamil and Indian subcontinent settlers and traders (‘the word ‘visaya’ translates in Sanskrit for ‘the object of affection that changes when the observer gets closer’). This means that unlike the northern main island of Luzon (where the Philippine capital, Manila, resides) and the southern main island, Mindanao, the Visayan region is geographically differentiated and diversified by dispersed island histories, cultures, traditions, trade networks and communication channels. It is in this web of Visayan inter-island relations that the Spanish first established its imperial architecture of the Catholic Church and introduced the ideology of Catholicism in the Pacific.

However, the Spanish administered the Visayan Philippines colonies not via the European continent, but from the Mexican Catholic Church. The “fiesta system” successfully engaged similar techniques of governance enacted in Mexico, where song, dance and performance in religious ritual functioned as tools for conversion among isolated island populations.² Religious festivals involved reverence to Catholic saints, over time instituting patron saints for each region and replacing animist rituals practiced in native cultures. Featuring “processions, dance, music, theatrical presentations, elaborate float and effigies of saints, and even beauty pageants,” these



Figure 2 A competing dance team for Sinulog Festival 2019 performs in costumes as tattooed tribal peoples worshipping Santo Nino. Sinulog Festival is one of the oldest ‘dance’ rituals turned community festival in Philippines, now one of the biggest tourism events in the nation. (Cebu City, Cebu)

public spectacles during festivals engaged “mimetic representation of story through dance.”³ Hundreds of years of song and dance later, as the *illustrados* (learned elite) of Philippine colonies sought for independence, only to be overturned into American empire, the embodied technologies of song and dance continued to function as tools of imperial governance.

Following Philippine independence from

Spanish empire in 1898, American justification for colonial control over the Philippine islands (in the face of increasing anti-imperial factions on the continent) oriented itself as an educational project to address Filipino “degeneracy”. The simultaneous acquisition of Philippine colonies along with Puerto Rico, Guam and Cuba stretched the “limits of settler expansion.” The inhabitant population were recognized as “differing in race” and “varying among themselves,” though they formed common linkages as ‘childlike’ cultures “not fully civilized” nor “prepared for political responsibilities;” the island colonies thus required different modes of site-specific management by imperial governments. In the Philippine context, the Schurman Commission proposed forms of government “most conformable to [Philippine] customs, traditions, sentiments and cherished ideals.”⁴

Yet as Fenella Cannell has elucidated from American accounts during this period, it is important to recognize how Protestant principles effected this transformation, “placing religious ideas at the heart of colonial policy.” Unlike the metropolitan Manila elites, or the highland tribes of Luzon or Mindanao, the lowland Visayan islands were considered to be empty of an active native culture, save for their idolatrous devotion to figural objects (such as saints, introduced by the Spanish). This fascination for the fetish further prompted Protestant leaders tasked with educating Filipinos to focus on developing aspects of their “immaterial culture” through sport, song, voice. Physical development of Filipinos approximated to a kind of conversion within the tenants of Protestant discipline of the body.⁵ Focus on embodied conversion within civilizing education also corresponded to the “obstacle unique in the imperial archipelago: sustained armed resistance to the U.S. colonial regime.”⁶

Weary of this threat, among the first missions by American troops involved the suppression of armed revolutionaries and the organization of municipal governments and public schools. Building on Spanish institution of the church, its patron saint and surrounding plaza architecture as conversion sites via public performance rituals, the establishment of civil and provincial governments by American military became new “training grounds for self-government.”⁷ Given that today’s festivals operate from the same organization of municipal governments, which enforce public schools to provide free labor of dancers and performers, it is apparent how American imperial governance and their “capital investment, public education, and political tutelage became fundamental strategies of civilization in the Philippines.”⁸

Meanwhile, beyond the Pacific, the Paris Exposition of 1900 and the St. Louis International Exhibition of 1904 showcased captured indigenous peoples from Philippine islands in displays of exotic savagery. On the continental front, the characterization of Filipinos as “monkeylike,” only increased anti-imperial sentiment from African-Americans. Within these simultaneous social justice struggles against imposed projections of indigenous ‘savagery,’ profound anti-imperial sentiment began to link black Americans and brown Filipinos, both on the continent and in the islands. Writing on the origins of an African American anti-imperialist paradigm that recognized the connections [of imperial violence],” Nerissa Blase writes: “While the dissemination of the racial image of Filipinos in mainstream and black pro-annexation newspapers was a hegemonic racial project in support of imperialism, the same racial image became a counter-hegemonic racial project in “Negro papers” that maintained anti-imperialist and antiracist positions regarding the war.”⁹



Figure 3 Performers at Pasaway Festival 2019 celebrate the local copper industry by adorning themselves in feathered headdresses harking Native American tribal wear. Though the copper mine closed over 15 years ago, the city continues to celebrate its impact in bringing this region on the map of inter/national communications & trade networks. (Sipalay, Negros Occidental)

It cannot be underestimated how these linked anti-imperial struggles between black and brown peoples also inflected and inspired a native cultural aesthetics in response to increasing “political, economic, and cultural dominance of the Americans.” By the 1920s, still in the ‘budding stages’ of becoming a nation-state (where Philippine independence would be determined by American empire), Francisca Reyes-Aquino, a student of

physical education in Manila, began publishing and teaching collected research on ‘Philippine folk dance and games.’ No ethnographic research on Philippine performance existed at the time, making Reyes work groundbreaking in its focus on folk and indigenous dances. However, in her comprehensive manual of collected dances, there is little indication of “where the dance was first observed, recorded and notated, much less altered or standardized” for the textbook format.¹⁰



Figure 4 Representatives from a competing 'tribe' at Pintados de Passi Festival 2019 dress as a Chinese-like native and indigenous Ati, holding corn for ritual celebration. The festival is intended to celebrate the precolonial pintados (tattooed peoples native to Visayas discovered by Spanish); however, corn is not native to Philippines and became introduced to the islands via Mexico, making the costume's historical reference quite anachronistic. (Passi, Iloilo)

In the postwar era of postcolonial independence, Reyes became supervisor of the Physical Education at the national Department of Education where her collection of Philippine dances became part of the compulsory physical education curriculum. Dance, like in the imperial era, became part of the nationalist project, further substantiated by the cultural elite put into power by the colonial regime and postcolonial aftermath. Even national writer Nick Joaquin echoed sentiments of 'preserving' the authentic cultures not of the metropolitan, but among the lowland Christian folk who survived remote rural conditions.¹¹ Despite the absence of proper documentation linking the dances to communities in the Visayas and Mindanao, the revival of 'folk dance' as cultural artifact by metropolitan Manila elites helped bring Philippine dance into the international stage via the Bayanihan Dance Company.

Far from the representations of 'savagery' that characterized Philippine peoples in earlier international expositions, Bayanihan's 1958 premiere at Brussels radically transformed

global perceptions of Philippine culture. The high art of Western styles of dance merging with indigenous & folk influences became a distinct feature associated with Philippine culture.¹² The resounding response from the international platform to the Manila-based company's appropriation of lowland, folk, Muslim and indigenous dance practices further established dance as part of a compulsory physical education in the nationalist project of culture-making. Today, this co-opted choreography mobilizes populations via enforced participation of public elementary and high schools in regional Visayan festivals. How can we consider the politics of indigenous aesthetics inflected in these community-based public performances, if they are standardized by a metropolitan elite in search of developing a nationalist high culture, and appropriated in the interests of accruing global capital?

During the era of Martial Law under the Marcos, First Lady Imelda Marcos heavily invested in “dance as pride of the nation.” Just as the Philippines human rights violations became at the forefront of geopolitical attention, Imelda Marcos attempted to redirect this attention towards the regional arts for constructing a cultural tourism industry.¹³ As a Manila elite, her pet project to funnel political funds toward island festivals as tourism events left a lasting impact. The Philippines, a nation-state consisting of seven thousand islands in the ocean, were to now be marketed towards global tourists dreaming of a vacation in tropical paradise, invited to witness cultural spectacles of public music, song, dance, theater and performance. Organized from the smallest communal level of the barangay (neighborhood), managed by municipal offices authorized by national infrastructures and metropolitan elite implanted from imperial era, and yet future oriented towards global consumer tourist fantasies, these festivals reflect worlds far and beyond their island shores.

The trajectory of arts media aesthetics in Philippines becoming increasingly ‘abstracted’ rather than steeped in local social conditions grows in the context of global capital, as well as neo-colonial influence.¹⁴ Today, Manila Broadcasting Company is the host of Aliwan Festival, the festival of all festivals, which invites winning teams from regional festivals to the capital to compete against each other. Started in 2003, this national festival now sets the standard of judging in which local festivals develop their performances. However, the creator of this event, Susan Arcega, previously worked ten years for the British Intelligence Agencies (and briefly with American equivalent) in their cultural communications department.¹⁵ Given recent excavations by arts researchers demonstrating how British and American CIA actively sought to influence cultural arts productions in postcolonial states (towards spiritual abstraction, to counter Russian social realism), we must also consider how imperial powers continued to influence the islands in the cold war era.¹⁶

Dance, performance and theater, as tools of imperial governance over the colonial body, have impacted the public cultures of the Visayan islands. Cultural analyses of dance¹⁷, however, elaborate how dance absorbs processes of cultural transmission, appropriation and commercialization in the global economy; in this case, movement cultures of indigenous peoples, lowland rural folk, urban poor were instrumentalized in imperial, nation-state-building projects. Currently, each festival is structured as a ‘competition between tribes,’ echoing race battles between competing nation-states in postcolonial cnetwork. Nevertheless, it is within this context of anti-imperial struggles, inter-imperial appropriation, heightened retrenchment of racial domination and capitalist exploitation that, I argue, conditions of solidarity against oppression and cultural erasure have manifested for future turns.

How can these festivals also be sites of solidarity between black and brown indigenous peoples of color that have endured cultural erasure and violence of imperial colonial legacies? I return to the scene where I started. It is no mistake to see the resemblances of the costumes at Dinagyang with other decolonizing postcolonial nation-states and indigenous native cultures, from Pacific archipelagos and beyond. On one hand, the conscious acknowledgement of this connection is superficial at best. On the other hand, how can be these ‘community-based’ festivals, if configured as such sites of solidarity, collectively re-imagine networks of indigeneity through embodied public performance?

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