

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University · Loyola Heights, Quezon City · 1108 Philippines

Images of Women in Philippine Media, by dela Cruz

Review Author: Doreen G. Fernandez

Philippine Studies vol. 37, no. 3 (1989) 372–374

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>
Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

Book Reviews

IMAGES OF WOMEN IN PHILIPPINE MEDIA. By Pennie S. Azarcon-dela Cruz. Manila: The Asian Social Institute in cooperation with the World Association for Christian Communication, 1988. 136 pages.

The reach of media, the values so easily caught thereby, and the images of women projected, are the concerns that shape this book. Its aim is not just to expose, but to foster in the media audience a new consciousness of realities within women and men, so that they may "tell the difference between the unrealistic images used in media for business promotions, and their perception of themselves based on their capabilities and aspirations" (p. 6).

The book, the title of which bears the tagline "From Virgin to Vamp," began in 1984 when women from different professions formed the Philippine Women's Research Collective (PWRC) to assess from a grassroots point of view, the impact of the UN Decade for Women on Filipinas. The Alternative Country Report which they wrote and presented at the Nairobi Conference, viewed women as industrial, overseas, and peasant workers, as subjects of sex tourism and mass media—as against government reports about highly-educated women in high positions.

The media portion of that report came to be the focus of concern of the feminist research group, Pilipina, and the Mediawatch Collective, an advocacy group on issues concerning women and media. This provided the motive force for the book; and research done in 1985 by the Research and Publications Office and students of Maryknoll College provided the hard data.

The eight chapters of *Images of Women* cover radio and TV ads, print ads, newspapers and tabloids, weekly magazines, *komiks* and porno magazines, TV shows, radio serials, and Tagalog movies. The statistical and factual findings in each area, here analyzed and illustrated by examples and photographs, provide material for discussion, critical reflection, and concern.

In radio and television advertisements, for example, women are found to play the traditional roles of mother/homemaker, girlfriend/date/sex object, and their "desirable qualities" drawn upon to provide product support. Shown as "conscientious housekeepers; desirable, beautiful companions; caring, assuring, hard-working, frugal and resourceful homebound persons . . . [their] main preoccupation is to please their husbands" (p. 25).

Males, on the other hand, provide "the voice of authority"—both the voice-over that endorses the product, and the beneficiaries (husband or son) of

women's care and attentions. Women are the wives, homemakers and laundrywomen at home, and the "giggly teeners, students, or members of groups out to have a good time" outside the home. Men are the husbands, sons, domestics at home, but more predominantly the business executives, professionals, sportsmen and entertainers in the world outside.

Print ads not only buttress these roles, but, the research shows, project as well such insidious subtextual messages as: A woman's place is in the home; Women have to be soft and beautiful; A man has to be tough and strong, dominant and authoritative over women to be respected; Women exist to gratify men; Boys will be boys; Men are meant for bigger things and bigger pursuits; Women are silly, superstitious, and are inclined to believe traditional sayings rather than scientific claims; Caucasian is the way to be and the lifestyle to match.

The messages come from the colonial hangover and from the traditional roles society has assigned to men and women (the "Maria Clara syndrome;" the macho male), and are not therefore original to the media. It is here, however, that they are institutionalized, becoming both reflective and affective, impressing the images on the young, on the women themselves, on the middle and lower classes and their ambitions—and ignoring "the progress and development of contemporary Filipino women . . . [while] reinforcing the stereotyped images of women as less important, less intelligent, of less consequence and weaker than men" (p. 38).

At the time of the research, women reporters in the national newspapers were still generally assigned to what has been called the "lipstick beat"—fashion and beauty, food and health, home and entertainment. On the front pages women made news as "First Lady or member of the First Family; beauty queen, model or movie star; prominent personality or woman leader; art or sports celebrity" (p. 41) and on the inside pages (or the front pages of tabloids) as victims (of rape; as mail-order brides, entertainers, abused domestics, etc.).

One might add here, however, a footnote from the present. Since the end of the Marcos era, Philippine women have assumed dominant positions in the print media—as publishers, editors, columnists, and hard-news reporters. This is certainly due at least in part to the valiant role many of them played in the struggle for press freedom, and in the alternative press that was instrumental in the change of government. It is also certainly due to the high quality of talent and professionalism in their ranks. However, while their backstage roles have been upgraded, in print the mother/beauty/victim roles persist.

The beauty role ("Shape up or lose your man") dominates the weekly magazines, a "fantasy landscape peopled with royalty and celebrities . . . [where] women have been shunted from the mainstream of bigger issues and realities" (p. 70). The *komiks*, most far-reaching of all print products with 18 million readers weekly (sales of 3 million and a pass-on readership of at least 6), hardly ever portray women in careers and professions, only as housewife/mother/housekeeper, or as *vida/contravida* (i.e. virgin or vamp), or at best as strong women with intelligent approaches to personal problems. The porno magazines, as one might expect, confine women to "holding up the domestic front—whether . . . [as] adulterous wife, or a faithful, docile wife trying to

understand why her husband is adulterous," what the author calls "the Madonna-whore split all over again" (p. 85).

Since female viewers significantly outnumber males for most types of programs popular on Philippine television, they are obviously the sector most influenced by the medium. TV imaging, therefore, not only shows how the industry perceives women, but how it could and does affect the image-perception of its women viewers. The perception from the male-dominated industry is of "male fantasies and expectations of how women should act and position themselves in relation to men—both in the household and in their career—and less about the issues and concerns of women today." Where do most TV shows place women, then? In the home, where "they can support a man's decisive role" (pp. 99-100).

The book indicates, however, that since February 1986, shows like *Woman Watch* (exclusively on women's issues), *Public Forum* and *Probe*, and other talk/public affairs shows, deal more intelligently with women's images and issues. One might add that women now also hold important and prominent positions on television—producing, directing, hosting, announcing, designing shows—and as network executives. Only perhaps in cinematography have they not participated yet.

The plots of radio soap operas continue to revolve around family strife, with women "typically martyr, victim and superwoman keeping her disintegrating family together against all odds." The need, the author believes, is "for the broadcast industry to take on the responsibility of producing shows tailored to women as individual viewers and not . . . lumped together according to income level" (p. 113) since such groupings aim at the widest range of readers, and uphold the most conservative interpretations of women's roles.

Even on the movie screen, where the strength and power of the Filipina has already been seen in a few outstanding films, the general run still shows "women who are weak-willed, passionate and emotional . . . easily swayed by unbridled sexuality, by family and by lovers" (p. 125). Filipino women, the author points out, comprise 44 percent of the country's total labor force. In the countryside, 4.8 million rural women are either tilling home farms or doing piecework. And the country has a woman president. "But alas, you'd never guess that from our movies" (p. 127).

Summing up, Pennie Azarcon de la Cruz asserts that although media has not changed much since the research was conducted in 1985, there are sources of hope: women's studies programs in colleges and universities, current legislation in Congress against smut and pornography, nongovernmental organizations on the lookout against biases, misinformation and sexism, media campaigns and various consultations and dialogues.

Books like *Images of Women in Philippine Media*, and the research that led to it, are still another fount of hope. The woman question in the Philippines deserves hard questioning and critical reflection. Too easily do so many say, "Filipinas are liberated; they have held the family purse since the Spanish colonial period." Too easily is feminism dismissed by men as an obsession with repression. Too often, in triumph over the expanded roles they play, do women themselves not realize the limitations society still imposes on them.

The actual position of woman in Philippine society is veiled by the power she wields in the home, the freedoms she has won, the empowerment of some. Since, however, the cages and stereotypes are still visible in media, they must still exist, at the very least in the minds of some of those responsible for media. They therefore still affect a majority of viewers. Enlightenment—through research and writing—is part of the liberation and empowerment of the Filipino, both man and woman.

Doreen G. Fernandez
Department of Communication
Ateneo de Manila University

EMIGRANTS, ENTREPRENEURS, AND EVIL SPIRITS /
LIFE IN A PHILIPPINE VILLAGE. By Stephen Griffiths. Honolulu:
University of Hawaii Press, 1988. 95 pages.

The author, born of American Episcopalian missionary parents, grew up in the Philippines, in the village of Balbalasang in what is now the subprovince of the Cordillera Central. After graduating from college in Hawaii, he served as a Peace Corps volunteer in a village in Malaysia. Returning to the Philippines in 1973 in order to do graduate research work in anthropology, he opted to work in a village in Ilocos Norte. He chose the village of Bawang (a fictitious name) for the following reasons: 1) Bawang has a history of emigrants to Guam, Hawaii and California since the days of the depression; 2) many emigrants have returned with their dollar earnings, have purchased farmlands, and have built substantial concrete and wooden houses in which to retire; and 3) since 1940, many village folks have engaged in the garlic trade, either by borrowing capital from returned emigrants or investing part of their dollar savings in the garlic trade. As one villager put it: "Here we have two important products, emigrants and garlic, and that is why we are rich" (p. 5). Indeed the barrio folk of Bawang do celebrate more lavish and expensive fiestas than those of the capital town of Simbaan (another pseudonym).

After the first chapter titled, "Prologue: Voices from the Past," the author discusses in the next three chapters the emigrants and entrepreneurs, as well as the changes in socioeconomic and cultural life which the village has been undergoing. In the last chapter, titled "Reservations for the Next World," Griffiths discusses at length the third element in the book's title, namely, the "evil spirits."

The Bawang folk believe that spirits can be either benevolent or malevolent; that they were created by God at the same time he created man, and that they reside in Mount Mawakwakar. The spirits intervene in human affairs by inducing men and women to become witches and thus become the tools of the spirits in causing people to become ill, or have accidents and eventually die. Witches are believed to be initiated by the spirits into witchery by making them partake of the flesh of human beings whom the spirits themselves kill. And witches must begin to exercise their witch power or else be killed by the