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David B. Baradas



The most memorable instance where the realm of aesthetics struck me as a very complex matter was when I did field research among the Maranao Muslims of Mindanao. On my first arrival in the area, I was struck by a major visual assault—the utter garrishness (my aesthetic value judgment showing!) of the colors used in the *malong*—the tubular *sarong* generally worn by both sexes. My sense of dismay was further heightened when I realized that the malongs were painstakingly handwoven and embellished with the most intricate woven strips of tapestry. I felt a sense of loss for what I knew as a superb textile totally degraded by what I perceived as a gross use of colors.

My negative reaction later turned out to be an excellent lesson in humility that I was never to forget even up to today, twenty years later. The initial negative aesthetic reaction was resolved while attending for the first time the nocturnal ritual of the death wake. Sitting in the midst of a crowd in a cavernous ancestral house lit by flickering oil lamps and watching a slow procession of incoming guests all dressed in their most festive malong—I realized that the colors of the malong take on the most incredible hues, and I was left dumbstruck and totally mesmerized by what is the most stunningly coordinated mix of colors I will ever see. Suddenly I realized that the malong, to the Maranao, is meant to be viewed at a particular space-time and ritual context to capture its wholeness, and that outside this domain its appearance is not as important. My aesthetic presumptuousness abruptly ended that night.

This incident made me realize the highly perceptual differences elicited by objects or situations from the viewpoint of a user/actor and that of an intruder/observer. It is in instances like this that a culture reveals its “ways of seeing.”

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This brief note on Philippine aesthetics is based on three basic assumptions. Firstly, the Philippine experience has to be viewed in a particular light. The colonial experience the Philippines has undergone makes for a hybrid culture or a syncretic aesthetic tradition. Secondly, the aesthetic clarity of the still existing ethnic minorities, which we refer to here as the "Other Philippines," conveys an unfamiliar richness which could be utilized as an excellent source of inspiration for the visual arts, if one is aiming for a culturally unique result. Thirdly, when cultures are threatened, and the Philippines is, they respond, or should respond, with revitalization movements along nativistic or indigenous directions. A revitalized culture will have a correspondingly revitalized aesthetic direction. I will focus on these three aspects to illustrate a peculiar direction of aesthetic development as conditioned by strong external pressures.

Syncretic Aesthetics

The history of the Philippines reveals a series of exposures to outside influences with western influences beginning to filter in in the middle of the 1500s. Located on the edge of the Great Traditions of Asia, its politically decentralized system was no match for the encroaching outsider. Composed of small warring petty sultanates undergoing incipient Islamization at the time of Western contacts, the Philippines presented very little resistance to the skeletal force of conquistadores. Political subservience also spelled cultural domination, and by the middle of the 1800s the Philippines' urbanized centers displayed almost all the external trappings of a hispanized colony.

The almost total colonial period obliteration of traditional lowland patterns was to shape what contemporary society experiences in culture and art, and by extension, in aesthetics. Any discussion of an indigenous aesthetic has to begin from a very recent period in the early 1800s when a private school of painting headed by a half-caste named Damian Domingo was authorized to operate in Manila.

By the late 1800s two of its known painters named Juan Luna and Felix Resurreccion-Hidalgo were winning top honors in the art salons in Spain and France. Trained in Europe, these two Filipino painters excelled in their art and this led to their being proclaimed locally as master painters. The adulation given to Luna and Hidalgo influenced very strongly the outlook towards western art that was fostered in the generations that followed.

But the Spanish influence, which is actually a Mexican version of Spanish culture since the Philippines was colonially governed via Mexico for 250 years, did not fall on very resistant cultural ground. Left on its own, it remolded and transformed whatever it came into contact with and produced an entirely new form in the process. This dynamism of the system recurred time and again and manifested itself in many aspects of Philippine society and culture.

If one were to search for a local tradition of the visual arts as understood in their contemporary connotation, the Philippines would have little to show by way of a continuing tradition that could be reckoned, even within the written historical period. The paucity of data on indigenous aesthetics in most basic art references in the Philippines has as little to do with the lack of documentation as with an absence of a local synthesized tradition that has attained a level of style. A possible exception to this is the tradition of painted portraits of the upper class, but only a handful had survived the ravages of war and time. It seems that the indigenous tradition is diluted in the process of its emergence and if it does attain a stylized level it always conveys strong hints of its other nature as well.

The Philippine carved folk saint is the best example of this syncretic phenomenon, where the coming together of two distinct traditions best manifests itself. This ritual object—the folk saint—occupied a significant place on the family altar of the ordinary Filipino during the colonial period. Unlike the bigger *santo* found in the stone colonial churches and chapels that litter the Philippine countryside which was carved following the local priest's instructions to copy as closely as possible the European iconographic format, the family altar folk saint did not come under the priest's jurisdiction. In these folk saints the local sculptor lavished his work with feeling, and the pieces that came down to us today not only exude the undeniable charm of folk art, but radiate as well the power of good sculpture. Using a European saint as a model, the local carver proceeded to inject his sensitivity to the world around him in his work. The resultant product is distinctly a hybrid—partly derivative, partly imitative, partly adaptive, but highly original.

A tinge of derogatoriness is implied when one refers to a work as either derivative, imitative, or adaptive. In Third World contexts where the colonial experience generally leaves an indelible mark, being derivative, imitative, or adaptive is a given. Within such a society accommodations and adjustments are continually being made so that highly disruptive elements are transmuted. Viewed from one

perspective such a society often conveys a sense of harmony and coherence. It is only when it is pitted against or confronted by another society that those accommodated elements sometimes take on a negative light—and accusations of being “copycat” or “second rate” are often heard.

To insist on the pristineness or undiluted quality of an aesthetic tradition is to deny the inherent capacity of social systems to change and alter through time. Social systems or aesthetic systems are not static nor consistently uniform all throughout. The things and conditions that elicit or evoke aesthetic experiences vary from culture to culture and even vary from individual to individual within the same culture. To insist that a particular aesthetic orientation should take a highly specific form is to constrict or restrain in highly confining ways the creative impulses of any one system. It is this dynamism that often serves as a mechanism to constantly refine its own essence, leading to different or new levels of aesthetic realms.

The common assumption in the field of aesthetics is that there is a universal basis for perceptually gauging products of an aesthetic nature. How consistent are these criteria? Are they applicable across cultures? Does any one tradition or system have a right to pass judgment on an emergent new form that is a product of two diverse systems? How far back in time can we go in considering such a cross-breeding of aesthetics valid enough for it to attain its own integrity? What are its limits, if any? To all these questions I have only partial answers. In contemporary times, when the existence of videos are so commonplace, the influences that such devices bring to alter various perceptual and aesthetic orientations of people all over the world is very significant. Our awareness of their potential impact on the psyche is our best weapon for coping with them.

The Other Philippines

A compartmentalized aesthetic can be delineated when one speaks of Philippine culture. On one hand we have the lowlanders who constitute roughly 90 percent of the entire population and who succumbed to colonization efforts and whose general lifestyle opened itself to varied and unlimited influences. On the other hand, we have the remaining 10 percent who eluded colonization efforts and protected their political and cultural integrity by retreating to the high-

lands and to inaccessible terrain and consequently succeeded in maintaining a way of life that is at best only minimally linked to the national mainstream.

Due to long periods of isolation, whether forced or self-imposed, this "Other Philippines" presents a sharp contrast to the comparatively colorless and drab lowlanders. This is the world the outsider does not often hear about. It is a world of pristine patterns, of communion with nature, and of unvanquished spirit. This world has retained its richness and traditions. It is also this Other Philippines that the larger culture turns to when it wishes to convey a sense of unique traditions and an uninfluenced distinct image for the country as a whole. It is this world that the artist of today should constantly dig deep into for his inspiration, insight, and connectedness.

The tradition from which the visual artists can draw their inspiration has a wide range—weaving, carving, metal work, personal adornment—to mention only a few. These objects cannot be classed as "visual arts" since this term is an outsider's category. As in all traditional cultures, the interlinkages of the different aspects of the culture are such that we have to view these objects in their totality and not as specialized fragments of a whole. It is in the wholistic perspective that we get an inkling of the reason for the continuities and persistence of certain aesthetic forms over a long span of time.

Most of the ethno-linguistic groups in the Other Philippines exploit psychic and sensory experiences to get to the heart of the matter. The practice of divination, meditation, ritual purification, ritual dancing, chanting, fasting, etc. are channels to enhance one's ability to establish interdimensional links and to attune one's self to cosmic forces. These are viewed as vehicles for coping with major problems or with life crisis events. Manifestations of artistic and aesthetic perception represent special elements of these experiences or are produced as a result of these practices. That is why some of the most aesthetically powerful pieces are related to the most complex or sacred rituals. To provide an idea of what these objects are, let us briefly describe them as they occur within the context of a tradition in the "Other Philippines." For purposes of clarity and simplification, I have grouped the numerous ethnic minorities into four major culture areas, as follows: The Cordilleras of Northern Luzon, The Muslim groups of Mindanao and Sulu, The Ethnic highland groups of Mindanao, and The Palawan-Mindoro Group.

The population encompassed by these groups accounts for most of the people of the "Other Philippines." Instead of just describing

the objects, I have subsumed them under four main underlying aesthetic principles which are pan-Philippine ethnic in their manifestation. These overriding qualities that characterize these objects from the different ethnic groups are resultant products of the creative processes.

1. Heavy emphasis on form and motifs.

Recurring and highly repetitive patterns of motifs and consistent use of certain forms are notable in all the traditions of the "Other Philippines." Decorative elements found in varying forms appear in the surface decoration of household objects, weaponry, ritual paraphernalia, jewelry, and costumes. In the Cordilleras, motifs that include the human figure, snakes, lizards, and pigs are consistently used in the embellishment of objects, both for everyday use as well as for ritual. The most dominant of these figures is a carving of either seated, standing, or dancing human paired-figures called *bulul*. Beyond their ritual intent, these figures are carved with consummate skill and an aesthetic sense that makes them the favorite collectible pieces from this area. Ironically, it is the foreigner-resident who would initially take interest in these pieces, eluding detection by Filipino art aficionados until it was too late to do any formal study of them.

Among the Muslims of Mindanao representational art, particularly of human and animal figures, does not recur. The influence of orthodox Islamic practices is very obvious here. In lieu of these, there is extensive use of the *okir*, a vine-leaf-tendrill motif. Among the Maranaos, the *okir* is generally colored, while among the Sulu archipelago Muslims, it is left in natural finish. The *okir* motif is embellished in practically all objects especially among the Maranao. It is evident as well in the weaving, although less and less of it is being done at the moment. More in evidence is the use of geometrics which are arranged in patterns and specific symmetry and differentiated with the extensive use of colors. This is executed in the *langkit* the tapestry woven strips in the *malong*.

Among the highland ethnics of Mindanao (Bagobo, Bilaan, Kalagan, Manobo, Mandaya, Tagakaolo, T'boli and Ubo) the most interesting achievement is the *ikat* process in the abaca woven cloth which they embellish with animal and human figures. For a long time this particular tradition was not too well known, and it is only in the more recent period that the very sophisticated use of *ikat* among them was discovered. The T'boli of Cotabato continue to produce the abaca *ikat* in large quantities, a result of earlier revitalization efforts of some private agencies.

Animal forms again recur with considerable regularity among the Tagbanua of Palawan Island. Various animal forms, particularly birds are extensively carved for ritual. Among the Mangyans of Mindoro, the existence of ritual representational symbols in their cloth is very reminiscent of the "yantras" in India.

2. Concept of space does not allow the use of empty spaces in composition.

This particular orientation is characteristic of practically all the groups with the exception of the Cordillera where quite often a singular motif or figure adorns an object. But the over-all patterning of motifs in a given space is much in evidence, particularly in the architectural detailing of the traditional houses.

The same concept of the use of space holds true for the Muslims of Mindanao. Every available space is filled with various permutations of the vine-leaf-tendrill motif. The ancestral houses of the Maranao and the gravemarkers of the Samals of Tawi-tawi are excellent examples of this. Even the hard metal work does not escape this principle. The brass casting technique is a highly elaborate procedure that completely encases the body of any piece with elaborate designs, either geometrics or okir designs. The Maranao, particularly, excel in the silver inlaying on brass, unequalled in any other Philippine ethnic group.

The idea is not to leave any space to set off whatever design might have been created in any given space. This particular aesthetic preference is so widespread in the different indigenous areas of the Philippines that one could not help wondering whether this principle is in the unconscious substratum of all contemporary Philippine creative processes in the visual arts or in the general area of design as in fashion, interior decoration or architecture, as well.

3. Utilization of highly impermanent materials.

This principle is most evident in the recurrent rituals held for as many reasons as there are deities, human problems, illnesses, misfortunes, and natural forces. It is during these occasions that enormous expenditures in resources and energy are made in creating pieces that quite often are either burned, eaten, destroyed, or discarded after use. The use of highly impermanent materials is not only seen among the ethnic minorities but among the Philippine lowlanders as well.

What is evident in this practice is experiencing the essence of the moment or the ritual. Importance is given more to the group interac-

tion that results in such gatherings than in the external trappings that only enhance the coming together of such groups in the first place. The interactional validation of a village-wide network is the central focus, and the physical visual accoutrement plays a secondary role to a higher scale of value.

This particular aesthetic value is almost the opposite of the western penchant for preservation, notable in the use of highly permanent materials in the creative process and its subsequent care. How many times have we watched a westerner gaze in awe as something that had taken considerable energy and skill is burned or destroyed after use or in the process of using. This is not to say that there are no permanent materials used in these cultures. Various kinds of metals are worked over to produce various objects for everyday use and for personal adornment, weapons, musical instruments, or rituals. But the fact remains that a range of objects, wherein considerable energy is spent or where creative processes are in great evidence, are made of highly perishable materials and that there is no attempt to preserve these materials or that no great value is attached to them. This is quite a marked departure from what we know of modern conservation, documentation, and preservation—which is a very highly developed field in the west.

In museums great efforts are expended to preserve these highly perishable materials. I am always reminded of the shocked faces of my western colleagues who upon gazing at objects which they felt had not been properly taken care of, not because we are careless or uncaring, but because in terms of priority they occupy a lower range of value than the actual ritual or social nexus in which such objects are embedded. There is an obvious need here to know the difference between what we are admonished to preserve and what we intuitively sense as intrinsically important enough to preserve.

4. Sophisticated use of geometrics and color.

Another principle that is discernible particularly in the Muslim area of the Philippines is the use of geometrics and color. This particular orientation is not duplicated anywhere else in the Philippines and is unique to the Muslim area. Colored geometrics are achieved in one medium—weaving on backstrap looms—among the Tausug, Samal, Yakan, and Maranao. Pure silk threads are used in the process of creating these works of pure geometry and color. This particular tradition which was prevalent when a brisk trade was carried on

between Muslim Mindanao and the middlemen of the mainland Chinese silk traders. The tradition abruptly came to an end with the introduction of cheap cotton earlier and intensified with the onset of World War II.

One of the more unique features of this tradition of colored geometrics is found in a piece of woven cloth woven by the Yakan of Basilan Island. They were able to achieve an optical illusion in the woven cloth—a phenomena that is quite uncommon. This squarish-shaped cloth called *seputangan* is generally used as a male headdress.

The Tausug male headdress called *piz* rivals the Yakan *seputangan* both in color, geometry, and intricacy. Although executed in a different technique and using different materials, both groups have achieved parallel levels of excellence. Although both groups continue to weave up to the present, the lack of the raw silk materials has affected their productivity as well as their artistry.

The Maranao who had achieved a high degree of sophistication in their tapestry strips for the malong have continued with their tradition of silk thread weaving, not only of malong but other items of wear as well. Their Samal counterparts in the far flung Tawi-tawi islands, because of their geographic location, have less access to silk threads. As a result, their tradition of silk belts and headdresses has almost totally disappeared.

The use of geometrics and color is echoed in the strip weaving of sleeping mats among the Samals of Tawi-tawi islands. The colored geometrics in the cloth among the Tausug and Yakan were achieved in symmetrical fashion, while the colored geometrics on the sleeping mats of the Samal are totally asymmetrical, but nonetheless still very coherent. Considering that the weavers have no sketch or plans except what is in their heads while weaving, their skill it appears is far more complex than the most sophisticated computer. The need to pass on these skills or protect their integrity is of utmost importance—a fact that has not been so far officially recognized in the Philippines.

Geometrics also figured in the weaving process in the Cordilleras among the Tingguian of Abra. Their woven blankets of highly symmetrical optically-deceiving patterns have remained unknown until very recently. We have yet to discern whether the creation of geometrics is conditioned by the production limits of the backstrap loom and whatever limitations it has. Or are the weavers tapping the collective unconscious and bringing down the form that is part of a repertoire of forms that are universal. The answer is still elusive. All we know is that the weaver's art in some of the groups in the Philip-

pires has produced some of the most interesting patterns and permutations we have known.

Aesthetic Revitalization

When a culture is threatened, it usually takes steps to protect itself in order to maintain its balance and sense of self. In most cultures this takes the form of conscious revitalization by going deeper into its creative well for inspiration. The Philippines as a culture, at some levels is a very threatened culture and it behaves so. One only has to note the works of contemporary artists to sense this highly intentional direction to ground itself in an identifiable culture rather than to play the game of culture hybrids. A realization has come that there is a rich treasure trove of themes, motifs, forms, images, color, ritual, and other materials to draw from for inspiration. But how does one use the past as well as the living present to make a statement about the human condition and to sensitize other people to what one perceives? The cardinal rule when faced with this challenge is to recognize that there is a problem.

We have spoken of the Philippines as a model of a cultural hybrid and that it has a treasure trove of pockets of cultures whose lifeways have been hardly altered which could serve as a fountainhead for inspiration. Being a cultural hybrid is both an asset and a liability. An asset in the sense that the barriers and boundaries that are often imposed by the culture do not exist for a hybrid, thereby creating a freer context to develop and function. It is a liability in the sense that the hybrid culture does not provide the focused nurturing elements so necessary in the socialization process to painlessly and effortlessly imbibe a crystalized aesthetic orientation that could serve as a foundation for later creative growth.

Several directions may be offered to serve as a catalyst for aesthetic revitalization.

The initial step is the documentation of the materials that are viewed as the possible source of data for subsequent instructional purposes, to synthesize already existing or scattered materials and summarize them in a coherent format of ideas, from the simple to the complex. By this effort the gaps in the data would become obvious. These gaps would then be noted as points for further research. The summary of this effort could be made available to as large a

number of people as possible in the art and culture fields for initial reaction, feedback, and corrective comments.

Interestingly enough for the Philippines, efforts along these lines were initiated and implemented up to a point a number of years ago. A project in the early 1970s called "Philippine Heritage" was started. It initially meant to publish a magazine, on a weekly basis, that would carry articles on Philippine culture, art, geography, archaeology, biology, and folklore, to be sold at affordable prices for students. The conceptualization of this project takes into account all the gaps in the historical and cultural accounts in the school textbooks. A flaw in the present textbooks is the failure to make any reference to our vital ethnic minorities, conveying to the young reader that these groups and their culture are not significant or important. Included in the project are all the latest findings in our prehistory, gleaned from the latest archaeological sources. The project was a positive step towards redefining our basic concepts of history. It is quite a departure from how it is presently taught. The ten-volume work came out but the present cost of acquiring this body of work is beyond most students' or teachers' budgets.

The synthesized materials have to be recast for use at different levels of instructions: elementary, secondary, and tertiary levels. Instructional manuals for teachers and students have to accompany the basic reading materials. The main thrust at this point is to provide the basic information about the country's culture, and an awareness of its historic and cultural past.

These basic instructional materials disseminated through the school system could be supported by outside reading materials published by private agencies under the guidance of the project. These type of publications could take the form of the following:

A Comic Books series featuring three types of content such as stories from legends and myths, pictorial dramatizations of historical events, and cultural features such as the depiction of certain ritual or practice; a popular scientific-geographic format (taking cues from the *National Geographic* magazine) could come out in a monthly basis; a cultural travel magazine focused on domestic tourism.

Any visitor to Japan cannot help but notice the incredible sensitivity of the ordinary Japanese to a lot of things that are aesthetic in nature. One has only to visit the most ordinary residence of a provincial Japanese to marvel at the level on which aesthetics are built-in into all levels of the life of the Japanese. In spite of a high

technology orientation, the smallest detail is looked into. One wonders whether this is one of the secrets of why the Japanese are so efficient and the most economically successful country in the world.

I discovered on a visit I made to Japan a number of years ago that the Japanese have one subject taught up to the high school level that is quite unlike other courses I have known in other countries. The subject is *ikebana*—the traditional flower arrangement. The subject is required for both men and women. If one takes a closer look at *ikebana*, one discovers that in this course one learns all the rudiments of aesthetics: form, balance, contrast, texture, color, symmetry—both in terms of dynamics and within the context of nature. It is a very high disciplinary practice whose results are obvious in Japanese life.

There should be a course in the school curriculum that teaches basic aesthetics to children even at the early stages of formal training. Practitioners in the art education fields have always known how art functions as a very meaningful segment of the curriculum content of schools.

Indonesia has gone even further to validate and support this principle by instituting a system of traditional art schools, distinct from the regular school system, as part of emphasizing Indonesia's artistic and cultural heritage. Each acts according to one's needs, and in the Philippines we need this particular infusion of aesthetic content in a very urgent way.

The impact of the printed page and the visual image is very powerful. In this age of paperbacks and videos, the significant influence that these channels of information make cannot be underestimated. Movies from other lands and ideas which have roots in another culture are readily available for consumption. Such materials if viewed by young impressionable minds can have a very significant effect which may not be positive at all. This, of course, is a well known fact, and measures to restrict the use or distribution of these materials should be implemented.

The role that media performs for the general population as well as the power it exercises in not only in disseminating, but sometimes also in unconsciously undermining, distorting, or corrupting the quality of the information it presents. If utilized properly, the media could be one of the most powerful attitude-changing devices known presently. With this obvious power to transform and effect significant changes in the viewer or reader, what has media done?

The media can create the most significant impact in programs of cultural revitalization. A required viewing time for cultural fare could

be instituted in prime time television programs to insure the largest exposure possible. It could create educational format programs that could serve as an adjunct to the school curriculum. It could feature role models drawn from highly successful professionals whose fields are in the arts and culture. In the third world at present, the ideal role models are movie stars and pop singers. Newspapers and magazines might be required to devote a regular section to art and culture—just as they do for sports.

A national program for the arts that reaches out to the grassroot level is imperative as a support system in coordination with the previously mentioned suggestions. In the Philippines since the end of the Marcos regime, a new direction in terms of outreach has been instituted and implemented and has resulted in decentralizing the activity from Manila, and allowing local systems to initiate programs for support. Various art councils have been formed in at least 18 cities, and the Cultural Center of the Philippines implements programs related to theatre, dance, literature, film, visual arts, ethnic conservation, and research.

A bill has now been passed in Congress which outlines the creation of the *Manlilikha ng Bayan*—a model patterned after Japan's system of protection and support for leading craftsmen in different fields. A subsidy that will allow such skilled and vanishing craftsmen to pass on their skills and knowledge is provided. The identification of these artists is being conducted by the National Commission on Culture and Art (NCCA) and it will pave the way for honoring nationally the talented craftsmen who have toiled to produce handcrafted treasures of sublime quality. It would be the culmination of a search for identity, an identification of what is aesthetic, and a return to the basics.

The search for a nation's soul is a collective journey for all. It can only be done in concert with others and it has to be pursued with sincerity and zeal. But most of all it should strive for the highest level of excellence and aesthetics.