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Migrating forms

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Migrating Forms

by

Ginette Castro

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
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ABSTRACT

Migrating Forms

by

Ginette Castro

With the cultural theories embodied in the ideas of Gianni Vattimo, this thesis attempts to explore the relevant assessment of exchange value (versus absolute value) in re-evaluating the present cultural situation in the Philippines. Replete with influences and cultural transformations from previous groups of colonizers, the optimum time for re-evaluation is now and resolutions to the state of an appropriate attitude towards a Filipino national identity has never before been challenged. There are, in the minds of the Filipinos, aging and irrelevant symbols of national heritage that need renovation so as to express this new opportunity of somewhat total autonomy. At this crossroads of possible cultural shifts, hypotheses arise in the search for appropriation. It is possibly the time to express that shift rather than develop a prescription for a new national identity.
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To Benigno S. Aquino Jr. and Corazon C. Aquino, who have offered the most inspiring deeds and sacrifices for the benefit of the Filipinos.

To my family, who provided the stage for a humbling surge of energy, a kind that allowed me the luxury of much needed objectivity.

To Lars, whose intellectual, professional support and friendship I could not have done without.

To all my friends whose belief in me exceeded my belief in myself.
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BRIEF CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE PHILIPPINES.

The Philippines is geographically located along the west Pacific rim, north of Indonesia and Sabah and east of Indochina. The 7,100 islands are home to about 56 million people, speaking 75 indigenous dialects besides the national languages, Tagalog and English. Its strategic location allowed it to play a major role in connecting sea lanes for trade and later for military purposes, making the islands susceptible to colonization from other more powerful groups of people.

It was discovered in 1521 by the navigator Ferdinand Magellan who paved the way for subsequent visits by other 16th century explorers. Initially, the search was for spices and other natural resources that would enhance the colonizer's power. Later on, it became a popular trading post where Chinese merchants called Sangleys and Europeans (mostly Spanish) traded silk, gold from Acapulco and numerous other goods. The dramatic story embodied within the Manila Galleon trade bespoke of glory and riches exchanged between two foreign powers and somehow underplayed the role that the native Filipinos played during these major transactions.

These times were part of the three-hundred year occupation by Spain wherein the first cultural transformation of the Filipino took place. Spain remained in the Philippines so long as their personal interests required. Numerous attempts of transforming included religious as well as educational means. "Educational" to the extent of being able to subdue and rule over the islands. One cultural note mentioned in numerous cultural history books, in Susantha Goonatilake's "Crippled Minds", insists on the almost irreparable damage inflicted on the Filipino culture in the form of tempering the extent
of education only to subdue and prevent antagonisms against the colonizers. As a result, all reformations of Filipinos were not whole or fully understood, having been dispensed in a foreign language (Latin and Spanish) and given in partial, devious doses. It is evident in the substrata of Filipino culture wherein actual concepts and ideas are still very foreign but the skill in acquiring technique is unmatched. This explains the mastery of Latin songs and Psalms from the Bible that are recited with emptiness and no meaning. Another example that Goonatilake points out is the schizophrenic state that is symptomatic of Filipinos where regular Roman Catholic worshippers are the most devout facing the church and the most sinful in the Catholic sense outside the church.

These and numerous more conditions are still evident in the formation of the culture as the pattern of colonization succumb to the effects felt during the American military occupation of the early 1900's and continues with the cultural occupation of the present day. The idea of a colonial mentality rests comfortably among many Filipinos, where nationalism has become a mere obligation rather than a true calling. The seductive lure of instant success embodied in the United States and its cultural trappings has always been a very difficult sight to avoid. As a result, the value system that the Filipinos have established for themselves is not truly theirs; once again, there may be visual evidence of progress and cultural wholeness where spiritual poverty and emptiness actually rest.

But what does one make of a failed attempt at simulating another people's culture? In other words, how can one successfully embody another's culture? The evidence points to the impossibility of perfect mimicry and the solution lies in accepting the
possible role of Filipino culture in the global community as a culture of total absorptivity and resilience. The most striking of ideas are ones of creative transformations, ones where blatant adjustments to foreign elements that now enter the country are modified in transmutations that allow for their usability. These forms begin to take a life of their own as familiar objects are stripped of appendages, and the existing infrastructure is incapable of higher standards of efficiency. Nevertheless, the new space or object now transmuted is relevant, but only relevant to its own time and place. Other places and spaces that have had conventional and classical roots have become irrelevant and their renovation and adjustment has become essential.
RESEARCH AND SYNTHESIS.

Extensive travels in Spain and the Philippines was an essential portion of the understanding of the two cultures. Means of recording information was relegated to the photographic technique of photo-collages (See fig. 1). This method allowed for an extensive overview of imagery that included every cultural detail within the image as possible, thereby build a rich resource usable for analysis and comparisons.

The images chosen embodied elements outside of the monumental spectrum, allowing for a renewed interest in the sub-culture of culture rather than the former. If images of monumentality were taken, they were always in a state of disrepair or weakness.

The construction of these two-dimensional images have led to a vast array of possibilities, not only in the form of the technique but a veritable clue as to the method by which an attitude can be formed regarding the idea of a renovated cultural identity (See fig. 2). These photo-collages arranged to make whole images were comprised of areas in the photograph where they overlap each other as well as that field of the photograph where the image is whole. In a very interesting way, a clear analogy between the complexity and multi-dimensionality of the superimposed portion of the photograph and the hidden but equally complex sub-culture of the Filipino hidden behind symbols of false national heritage has become the subject of inquiry. It is only fitting to attempt a revelation of the real culture, however complex or undefined (See Figs. 3, 4, & 5).
fig. 1. top: graffiti wall from Salamanca, Spain
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APPLICATION

An initial goal was to design a Filipino cultural place in Spain. After careful observation, the purpose was served well upon locating an entity in the city of Manila that was to become a symbol of Spain and its migratory culture. It was symbolic as it stood for the consequent colonizers that have come after.

The walled city of Intramuros (see fig. 6) still exists to this day as the first bastion of Spanish imperialism. The Spanish managed to capture this enclosure from the native datu chieftain and managed to transform it into a more western fort, one made of stone and mortar as opposed to the previous wood and sticks. The fortifications and the few buildings that survived World War II have at present become a visible symbol of Filipino heritage. There is urban Filipino life within these walls today, not like in the past where life within the walls was exclusively for the use of the displaced Spaniards. It is interesting to note the fencing out of the native population from the supposedly more progressive inside. But it is relieving to observe that their apparent paranoia of things "native" to the place has become an obvious sign of weakness.

Today, the "insides" of the walled city are comprised of a myriad of uses ranging from government buildings, educational facilities, commercial warehouses and offices, tourist attractions and two types of residents, the legal and the illegal. It is the illegal residents (squatters who occupy ignored land areas, most of the time temporarily as their mobility is essential once they are evicted) that have become the important resilient group, as they are, in their ways, as hardy and resourceful as the pre-colonial subsistence farmers that grew crops only as needed and who avoided the surplus
growth of resources. In a way, a parallel between pre-colonial natives versus the Spanish colonizers and the present squatters versus the present Philippine government posits a situation of a recycled use of power that has overtones of local imperialism.

It is with this that the culmination of the cultural research draws itself to a vital project as the universal problem of colonization embeds itself within the human psyche in varying levels, from the macro to the micro environment, thereby posing a problem that not only is a result of outside forces but one that is symptomatic from within as well. This project is not about condemning past mistakes of history but one that allows for an understanding of the effects of it, thereby clarifying how best to move forward into the future with much spirit and dignity.
THE PROJECT

The site chosen is the southwest corner of the wall enclosure which includes the actual first stones that were laid on the ground by the Spaniards. This heart-shaped corner called Bastion de San Diego contains a cylindrical form that was known to function as a cistern. This tourist attraction is one of standard quality, similarly dealt with in a conventional manner. Quite appropriately, there has been extensive archaeological work done in the past years, revealing a remarkable wealth of information and bits of history that allows for an impression of serious thought as to the value of its contents. East of the wall fortification is a row of functioning warehouses, appropriately poised as a counterpoint to the wall as a heavy symbol of the power of commerce at the present time as well as the past.

The strategy that demands testing is the idea of the space between these two giants of symbols as an opportunity to address the present thought on the crossroads towards a new cultural identity.

Returning to the methods of photo-collaging, a two-dimensional layer of similar form is blanketed over the site in plan, thereby providing another layer of ordering that can be used to generate new vignette spaces. These spaces can become what can be loosely termed as "construction sites" as they will be thought of as temporary formations that address a very short period of existence one whose purpose will only be that of addressing that very crossroads. (see fig. 7) This new ordering, although becoming similarly a sense of some kind of power seems inevitable. The only recourse is to put this new system to test out revised values and intentions.
What is produced is a collection of construction sites that become micro-environments of the whole, with adjacent lines being folded into the designated spaces to produce local ordering systems and graphic lines becoming a figment of some form of usable lines like drainage or seating. Other lines are transmuted into a network of waterways that feed the old cistern rainwater from a developed rain-catching structure, allowing the cistern to resume its function but only at a limited state as rainwater can only be available periodically. The other water function that would re-legitimize the existence of the cistern is the provision of two banks of public toilets within the earth south of the old cistern. This is a prime example of the previous thought regarding the use of foreign elements and adjusting the appendages to suit local needs. Many public toilets in the Philippines have western toilets stripped of the back tank and supply piping. The remaining piece is the actual toilet bowl (no seat) cast in a concrete pad. The enclosure contains a standard faucet and a bucket of water. The validity of this stripped form is the magic of the transmutation, where the new version is clearly a result of its function. These cavernous spaces of toilet banks also become a fractal part of the toilet bowl, as the whole space will allow water to fall in and around the sides.

Another developed site is one situated to the south of the row of warehouses where literal inversions were created to house functions of daily living, i.e. horizontal (versus vertical) drying racks, horizontal (versus vertical) flat tables for graffiti, etc. As an assemblage, it is ripe with buried graffiti from Spain and the recent past as well as cruciform symbolisms.
On the southwest tip of the warehouse row is another construction site with a small structure that exemplifies a permanent fixture in the city. Sari-sari stores are five and dime stores that sell goods as well as provide an essential gathering place for the city folk. It is where ideas are exchanged, chess and other board games are played, gossip originates and terminates and where everybody sits to cool under an available shade.

Walking towards north along the space halfway to the end of the site is a freestanding structure that houses rows of reflective glass on the east side. As one walks along the ramp, the superimposition of the image of the fortification alternating with the real facade of the warehouses tends to squeeze the width of the passageway, allowing for a somewhat renewed impression of the area.

Finally, walking still north, one encounters another freestanding structure that contains two walls that appear to crack a soon-to-be constructed wall. This construction site reverses in time what was gone from the past. The unconstructed wall is actually the wall that was removed and that was existing in the past. The new walls that acts to crack the old/new wall open remains ambiguous and unresolved. To the west of the two walls is land overgrown with tall wild grasses called "talahib". A talahiban is then that land that is overgrown with talahib. It appears as if after this parcel was uncovered by the removal of the thickness of the wall, the wild grasses have grown, not unlike the removal of a cast off of an arm whose dense hair has grown uncontrollably long.

Previous descriptions of the specific construction sites are just a sampling of the intricacies of each individual spaces. There are the unmentioned spaces that prove to
be equally important in providing new paths, stairways, sidewalks and mere cracks on the walls and ground that serve in the over-all to provide an attitude of a non-cynical and subtle addressing of the monument.

In retrospect, the project comes to a temporary conclusion that embodies the attitude of the now and nothing more. It is an important periodicity that needs to be experienced and remembered. Because of the burden of assessing one's own culture, it attempts to achieve pure objectivity and maturity only in the interest of self-preservation.
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