

Presented at the 10th DLSU Arts Congress

De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines

February 16, 2017



## THE OTHERING OF THE OTHERS: The Indigenous in Contemporary Visual Art Practices in the Philippines

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**Abstract:** The Ifugaos; proud indigenous people of the northern mountains of Luzon in the Philippines and their cultural heritage are often used as a fine example of pre-Hispanic culture. They are defined as a lingering cultural structure whose historical narrative boasts of being mostly un-aculturated by dominant structures that pervaded their homeland.

However, the narratives of the structure of power relations between the dominant and lingering culture proposes a prejudicial image against the Indigenous people. The Ifugao people and their cultural heritage are frequently appropriated in both cultural and contemporary art practices by local and foreign tourists, artists, etc. Such appropriations of cultural artifacts led to commodification of the Ifugao people's cultural identity and heritage.

Historical accounts from the 1904 St. Louis World Fair to contemporary visual arts practices provides unsettling accounts of self-inflicted Orientalism in the Philippines. Defined as a pervading practice where the dominant culture is a willing participant in relegating the lingering culture in an unseemingly derogatory status in the narrative of history as power. This paper is critical of the effects of these prejudiced ideas and actions.

Furthermore, this paper argues that the use and commercialization of the bulul, an Ifugao ritual image/object by the Ifugaos themselves can also be perceived as self-inflicting Orientalism, the Ifugaos used these cultural artifacts, made copies of them (infuse with Western aesthetics) and sold them for income. The anthropomorphic carving of an Ifugao rice guardian, the Bulul is a familiar souvenir item along with other self-produced images of the said northern mountain tribe. Its physicality is more of a touristic aesthetic interpretation rather than its own indigenous attributes. This same ritual image/object is often mis-appropriated in the contemporary art scene without even a comprehensive perspective as to its purpose of being.

**Key Words:** Orientalism; self-inflicted Orientalism; commodification; appropriation; bulul

### 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper centers on the representation of the Ifugaos, one of the indigenous Cordillera peoples located in the northern region of Luzon in the Philippines, within contemporary art practices. It is critical towards understanding how, whom and what brought about the impact of self-inflicted Orientalism in the

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Philippines which can be analyzed and represented in the contemporary visual arts as well as critically reviewed to understand this unsettling touristic point of view on the social and cultural aspect of the Philippines. And thereby to create awareness that self-inflicted Orientalism practices that existed before, still exists today.

The research proposes to look at the structured power relations between the dominant and the lingering. Lingering is defined as a cultural structure whose progressions in the developmental process of the historical narrative are not fully acculturated by the dominant structure. It proposed that looking at this structured relation of power can help us critique the pervasive understanding of the narrative of history as development that is part of Orientalism. And perhaps, form a new structure where the dominant and the lingering co-exist into one structure of power.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This paper used the descriptive method of research as an investigative tool in order to adequately interpret findings based on historical and socio-cultural context. Comparatively, the method is suitable to this study since it aims to describe the present condition of cultural appropriations that is pervading the IP community.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research argues that the narratives of history as development of power brought about the exploitation of the Ifugao people, their ethnographic arts and cultural traditions through specific Philippine historical events such as the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis, Missouri. It was there that 1,200 ethnicities such as the Bagobos, Moros, Negritos, Ifugaos and other Igorots were exhibited in their artificial "natural habitat" and made to perform their customs and rituals every day to be observed by the paying visitors of the World's Fair. (Rydell)

This research paper argues that the said event reinscribes a western rhetoric called Orientalism (Said). This process of defining the east, by academic discipline, proposes to study eastern cultures and societies but some were drawn more on the perception of its otherness which resulted on the observation of western colonial supremacy and that the 'orient' is therefore inferior. This led to the belief of the *cultured West's* right to subjugate the *savage East*. It became an ideological assumption of images and imaginings that provide rationalizations for European colonizers to contextualize the Orient as a region in need of Western intervention or "rescue" based on a self-serving interest in which "the West" historically constructed "the East" as extremely different and inferior from them. Orientalists divided the world between the civilized and the exotic, uncultured *Others*, a terminology that has a negative connotation as it defines the receiver of the term as the opposite of the *self* and not as an equal. They were othering the multiple orients in general as the Other regardless of its contextual usage. All countries in Asia for that matter are cast in the same stage of development that is based on economic and technological power.

The emergence and practice of what Said termed as "Orientalism" has greatly affected the way the West perceived their cultures by imposing its perspective of what the cultures of the East should be. This knowledge production became the intellectual basis for upholding the integration of political structure in the narrative of development of civilization, and became a discourse that justified western empire building. Thereby, promoting the idea that western culture is superior to that of the East (Said).

The American organizers and Filipino collaborators of the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904 demonstrated that way of thinking by parading the inhabitants of the Philippines as civilized and uncivilized. In order to show the dominant narrative of history as development from primitive to advance culture, the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair divided the world between the civilized and uncivilized, and categorized the exhibitions according technological advancement and industrial sophistication (Rydell). This racialized narrative of history as the development of civilization can be understood as casting the lowest being the primitive-i.e. Native Americans, Aetas and Igorots, the semi-civilized-i.e. people of colors, blacks and the Bagobos, and moving up on

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the ladder is the civilized-i.e. Americans and perhaps the Filipino elites, and at the top is the advanced culture which of course belongs to the U.S. being the dominant culture.

Advance Culture	U.S.
Civilized	U.S.
Semi- Civilized	People of Colors
Primitive	Native Americans

Figure 1 American Point of View

Filipino Elites	↑
Bagobos	
Aetas, Igorots	

Figure 2 Filipino Elite's POV

The narrative of history as development of power based on economic and technological advancement as illustrated above in Figure 1 shows a structured form of Orientalism. However, the 1904 St. Louis World Fair also exposed a different kind of Orientalism called *Self-inflicted Orientalism*; a restructured form of Orientalism. It is when those who are non-whites decided to move themselves up in the ladder of categorization while maintaining the ladder's structure as shown in Figure 2. Philippine Honorary Commissioners Vicente Nepomuceno and Benito Legarda opposed the inclusion of the Igorots [a term used to refer to all of the indigenous people living in the mountains in northern Luzon] as part of the delegation sent to the fair (Scott). They claimed that the Igorots were not Filipinos and they should not be allowed to co-represent the Philippines along with the Christians. Fearing that all inhabitants in the Philippines were generalized as savages, the Commissioners were then required to self-inflict Orientalism. They categorized themselves as apart from the rest of the Philippine delegation (Kramer).

Self-inflicted Orientalism can also be observed when a denigration of a culture is precipitated and participated by the self which can be seen in Philippine culture at-large. In order to survive the onslaught of Western cultural invasion during the tourism boom in the Cordilleras in the 1980's, some of the Ifugaos' ethnographic arts shifted towards commercialization due to the tourism demands.

Tourism usually relies on visual practices to promote and represent destinations, such as cultural symbols and pictures that identify culture and people; representing society (Yan and Santos). A common example of this are tourists taking pictures with the locals in native clothing, or with them wearing the clothes themselves and experiencing things they were made to believe that the locals would normally do.

In addition, to attract the attention of more tourists and make additional income, staged traditional performances are presented out of context. Themes are most often changed and condensed to appease or placate the tourists' expectations. Rituals such as the Panag-benga and the Imbayah are acted out complete with ethnic songs and dances to suit the tourists' "authentic" experience. Even though the local villagers are conscious of this cultural fallacy, they are encouraged to perform because of the financial incentives offered to them. As it was in the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, the Ifugaos are compelled into commodifying their culture for financial rewards. Ritual performances for the sake of tourism demands leads to a different set of damaging ideas and events that in turn led to the commodification of their cultural heritage and objectification of their custom and traditions.

The treatment of the bulul woodcarving, an Ifugao rice guardian, underwent interventions heavily influenced by Western conceptions and ideas. By catering to the aesthetic demands of the buying power of tourists instead of remaining true to their cultural heritage, the objectification and commodification of the Ifugao's culture and ritual icons may also be viewed as self-inflicting Orientalism.

The woodcarving industry did not exist in the Cordilleras till the tourism boom. What they have before that time frame were *bulul* carvers, it was not an industry then. The anthropomorphic carving of an Ifugao rice guardian, the Bulul is a familiar souvenir item along with other self-produced images of the said northern mountain tribe. Its physicality is more of a touristic aesthetic interpretation rather than its own indigenous

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attributes. Visual representations taken to the extremes as in the case of a ritual image-object such as the bulul do not help in promoting or sustaining an indigenous culture's survivability. Woodcarving as a moneymaking commodity for trade are produced and sold in great quantity as souvenir items to tourists and for the export market (Hafalla).

Contrary to what was popularly written about the bulul, specifically as a god or guardian, discussions with Ifugao carver Santos Bayucca, Ifugao mumbaki Jason Domling and photographer/ artist Tommy Hafalla, (who has been documenting and living with the indigenous people of the cordilleras for most of his professional career) state otherwise.

They claim that a bulul is a ritual image-object, carved from a branch of a sacred narra tree selected for the purpose of healing a member of the community. It is used as a vessel to contain the disease/s of a sick man. A mumbaki (medium) then performs the healing ritual, bathes the image/object in a sacrificed pig's blood and invokes the spirits of the tribe to transfer all the sickness and misfortunes into the bulul. And what is left after that is next to nothing but trash remains of the ritual icon. The bulul being a rice guardian is secondary and it is not even deified. They are often placed in rice granaries to ward off thievery. The reason for this is because no one will dare enter the place for fear of having all the sickness and misfortunes transferred to the trespasser/s. A portion of the wood at the base of the bulul is chopped off to make an indentation in order to identify that it was already used in a healing ritual. This also serves as a way to differentiate it from other Igorot ritual icons like the tinagtagu) whose form is similar to the bulul but is used for wedding rituals (Hafalla, Domling and Bayucca).

Reflecting upon these discussions with Baguio based photographer, Tommy Hafalla and Ifugao artisans, Jason Domling and Santos Bayucca, about how their icons' narratives and culture are misrepresented, brings forth the critical question of authenticity, ownership and truth. When asked how these ritual statues became reduced to a singular, universal representation of that of the bulul, Tommy Hafalla shrugged and said, "I don't really know when and how it became singular. Like I said that it (the bulul) is the most misused and abused icon in the Cordillera."

The intentions of the producer and how the receiver reacts to the intended message can be misinterpreted which Thirteen Artist awardee, Kawayan de Guia echoed in the same discussion when he stated that: "Once the people started to believe in the misinterpretation of all these mentioned (bulul and tinagtagu), it really becomes scary."

### 3.1 Inappropriate Appropriations

In addition, this paper analyzes two visual artists and how their works about incorporating and appropriating ritual image-objects best exemplify self-inflicted Orientalism in Philippine contemporary visual art practice. The dominant culture's bias observation of morality led to a passive form of self-inflicted Orientalism. Mideo Cruz' *Poleteismo* (Silverio) and Ronald Ventura's *Watching the Watchmen* (Nicholson) bulul series drew opposite reactions from the predominantly Catholic viewing public.

Barely five months passed after the Mideo Cruz controversial appropriations, when artist Ronald Ventura chose to appropriate and incorporate a different ritual image/object for his art discourse. Ventura, heralded as one of the Philippines' most noteworthy contemporary artists appropriated one of the country's indigenous icons in his exhibition, *Watching the Watchmen* on November 13, 2011 at the Vargas Museum in U.P. Campus, Diliman, Quezon City.

A wide gamut of bulul alterations are scattered at the exhibition space, each depicts a cacophony of interpretations with one central theme; to portray the bulul image as pure form and nothing else. Never mind if it's regarded as a god or as trash, Ronald Ventura has his own version of the bulul, an image /object which he manipulated at will.

In an interview for the Philippine Star, Ventura denied himself and that of his intended viewer a chance to understand firsthand information on the indigenous culture's point of view he claims he is paying respect. He chose the bulul as a Filipino image/object, positing it as a possible contribution to the progress of Philippine Art, without giving any plausible reason other than it is full of symbolic meaning. Yet, he intentionally did not go up to the northern part of the country and meet with the very people whose image/object is the subject of his exhibition. By doing so, Ventura not only failed in informing his viewers of the



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nature and usage of the said image/object, he also contributed to its relegation as a commodified item by transforming the bulul images into anything but a ritual image/object. He admittedly stated that he took an icon of significance in the Filipino culture and represented it like popular collectible images, much like the souvenir items a tourist can buy at a souvenir shop (IganD' bayan). Justifying the use of the bulul image as form only does not excuse Ventura from objectifying a culture that he refused to understand.

Ventura states that the sacredness of it (the bulul) is gone. And that, he, conversely, is only using the bulul's outward appearance and nothing more. And in the process, Ventura othered the cultural views of the Others in accordance to his own perspectives.

When asked about a possible protest from the northern tribe of Luzon for desecrating a religious icon, he answered that, in his view, his creations "are no longer their Bulul and that man initiates the sacredness of religious icons, meaning that things are not considered sacred unless men intentionally think they are (Nicholson)." The problem with this argument is that: (1) Ventura states that he is paying respect to indigenous culture, (2) he appropriated the bulul image without understanding its cultural position (3) and he contradicts himself by stating that the sacredness of the bulul is lost; (4) He recreated the image and then stated that the image recreated is not that of the bulul because that was not the intention; (5) the title of the exhibit refers to the bulul ('Watching the Watchmen'). If the attempt was just to represent the transformation of the subject into a variety of interpretations, how does it differ from those we see in store shelves? The implied content of the exhibit (if there was one) was lost in the context setting and confounded by his conflicting statements.

Ventura (self-inflicted) Orientalized the Ifugaos by participating in the manufacture and commodification of a cultural icon. Representing the National center in the dominant structure of development, he contributed to the denigration of a ritual image-object (the bulul) he is trying to edify that he does not understand himself and thereby othered the other Others.

Appropriating images as 'form' is an acceptable practice in the art scene. However, the danger of taking and manipulating images and intentionally refraining to understand the purpose of the image is not only an insult to the culture where the image/object comes from, it also a disservice to the cultural narrative of a nation.

What is being definitive in Mideo Cruz's and Ronald Ventura's work as a media case study of self-inflicted Orientalism is a conclusive confirmation of an unrecognized Other. The National center as personified by the elites of Philippine society sustained the relationship of power between the dominant and lingering structures. Casting aside the indigenous people as a non-factor in the cultural equation is an indication of a self-inflicted Orientalist notion of othering the Others.

Two artists worth mentioning with regards to responsible treatment in appropriating the indigenous in the contemporary arts are Baguio based artist Nona Garcia and Paris based *Ifugao* artist Gaston Damag. Both their works speak of passion and respect for the indigenous culture.

Artist Nona Garcia's installation art exhibition 'Recovery' at the BenCab Museum on September 22, 2014 examines ritual image/objects with reverential zeal. She stated that she actually asked permission from council elders to have their approval in using indigenous cultural images in her work (Garcia).

Nona Garcia's works transcend the norms of visual imagery as she treats both space and ritual image/objects with scientific scrutiny. She used modern day technology to diagnostically dissect indigenous ritual image/objects. While the works may read like a query on the status of the culture in question being in a museum, the mere idea of inquiry also suggests that it is not so. What is not seen but is implied in the exhibition is the convergence of the dominant and the lingering mores that cohabitate the same space and continues to evolve culturally.

Gaston Damag examines the museums' approach to representing a culture that still exists as exemplified in the treatment of the artifacts one sees in museums. Labeling works as 'primitive art' posits the culture referred to as extinct. Implying through historical context that said artifacts are a thing of the past. Damag disputes the narratives of museum and thereby, knowingly uses representational images of bululs and presents them as a way of presenting an icon and/or culture that still exists (Zimmermann-Kratochwill). Damag did not deviate in representing the *bulul* in its traditional form. Rather, he fused it with architectural materials such as glass to suggest a narrative of cultures that is in constant engagement with one another. As

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an Ifugao and an artist, his visual interpretation of how his culture is represented brings to question the position of the indigenous in the Philippine contemporary art practice.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

It is the responsibility of the producer as a competent visual communicator, to give adequate visual framework or clear context to communicate the intended message through. Appropriating images without really understanding its meaning can often lead to these disturbing consequences, including the continued labeling of the bulul as a deified icon of the Ifugao people which, according to the aforementioned persons they are not. The fact that these iconic narratives are still not being addressed implies how little attention is given to indigenous culture. It follows then that the control and ownership of the truth and authenticity about their own culture does not rest with the Ifugaos themselves, but with that of the dominant majority. The National center, as represented by the elites of Philippine society, self-Orientalized the Ifugao culture. And the detached inaction of the lingering also contributed to their status in the narrative of cultural development as power. These narratives evidenced the on-going misrepresentations of the Ifugao culture and, as is the case in their inclusion in the 1904 World's Fair, they are still being Othered, ironically, by the people who are also often othered by the West. Through the action of othering the other Others, the Ifugao culture became objectified and therefore commodified.

What became acceptable as to how the Ifugao icons and culture are represented rests on the controllers of the dominant structure of society. The bulul became a Filipino icon based on the dominant culture's misrepresentation and appropriation of the lingering culture. The woodcarving industry did not exist in the Cordilleras till the tourism boom. What they have before that time frame were *bulul* carvers, not an industry.

The commercial subjectivity of the Ifugaos' cultural icon in the contemporary visual art practice, can also be viewed as another form of self-inflicted Orientalism. By singling-out the Ifugaos' ritual image/object, as a prime example of a truly Filipino icon, without even understanding its cultural position, only indicates how the dominant structure in accordance to his perception represents the lingering.

By promoting the indigenous people, like the Ifugaos as a good example of cultural ethnicity, the intention resulted in the exploitation of their cultural heritage. The Ifugao people are aware of this exploitative means of livelihood and can be viewed as self-inflicting-Orientalism, but then again, it is the dominant structure who forced this categorical imposition on them. The dominant structure self-Orientalize the lingering structure simply because they have conveniently forgotten to support the indigenous people to move up in the ladder of categorization of development that the dominant structure itself advocates, thereby creating a double standard in the structure of the narrative itself. One cannot simply emulate what is convenient and disregard the other Others.

By acknowledging and consciously understanding how the Ifugaos were 'marginalized' and appreciating the significance of the lingering indigenous culture co-existing with that of the dominant one. A new structure of identity can be conceived, that of an emerging possibility of change in the cultural narrative of a nation, dynamic of indigenous community relationship with the national identity.

This research recommends further study on the proposed cultural hybridity between the dominant and the lingering cultures as to address the following concerns raised during the presentation:

1. A possible way out of the structured narrative of development of power, based on Orientalism and self-Orientalism.
2. Discourse on what constitutes cultural capital without having to posit self-Orientalist narratives.
3. Further research and definitions on ethnies, nation and nationhood.
4. The merging of the dominant and lingering. How it could actually work, and whether it is acceptable and sustainable to all practitioners?

This paper takes the position that the cultural narrative of a nation based on the dominant and the lingering form a dynamic relationship between their own identities without losing or sacrificing their own cultural identity.

#### 5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to Dr. Francisco Benitez, Ms. Angel Shaw, , Kawayan De Guia, Tommy Hafalla, Santos Bayucca and Jason Domling.

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