

Exegetical Consciousness and Culture

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I am grateful for the opportunity to reply to the interesting comments of Maria Fer Mangahas about my article on the emancipatory potential of culture. This concept is indeed characteristic of our age; another is ideology. Both point toward an increasingly exegetical consciousness as an aspect of modernity. I agree that Williams (1976) has provided us with an interesting genealogy of culture; Markus (1997) has extended this to its western philosophical roots. Markus claims that western culture has antinomian sources. It expresses a supercession of nature as well as a sphere of autonomous values. The first results in technology as the progressive mastery of nature; the second makes it potentially emancipatory. Hence, in respect of the latter, many people would claim that the abolition of slavery, the end of official religious bigotry and, more recently, the gains against racism, sexism and phallocentrism are culturally emancipatory.

However, I differ from Mangahas by reasserting culture's importance in

the modern condition. I am not saying that all the problems in the Philippines are reducible to culture but am simply insisting that culture cannot be reduced to history, politics or even the economy. For example, if our understanding of who is a Filipino is culturally essentialist, relationships of power can operate unperceived and hence not open to question. For this reason, lacking an exegetical consciousness is increasingly disadvantageous in a global age. Therefore, when Mangahas says that 'many of the concerns and criticisms that Pertierra raises have to do with the representation of what is Filipino,' my response is that Filipino is whatever is represented under that rubric. It does not exist independently of its representation. Therefore, we must ensure that the term is not controlled by others, or only by some Filipinos. The English may refer to us as 'Philippinos' and associate us with domestic work, or the Spaniards think of us as a delicious biscuit; these are not odious representations nor are they the only ones. Throughout Asia,

Filipinos are seen as excellent and spontaneous musicians.

When Mangahas asks who are responsible for the prevailing cultural images, I guess the answer is the elite, the state, foreigners, and also the ordinary Filipino. This last is responsible for the image of 'Philippino' as domestic worker. As Mangahas mentions, social scientists introduced the notion of Filipino values and concluded that some of them (e.g. *kanya-kanya*, *palusot*, and *porma*) hinder national development. This is an example of cultural determinism, which any self-respecting anthropologist should reject.

I agree that we should all resist projecting our class, ethnic, gender, religious and whatever other perspectives that frame our thinking or, since this is very difficult, at least acknowledge our position. Perhaps, as Mangahas claims, the penchant for self-bashing is an indulgence of the rich but I would suggest that the poor are not necessarily more certain nor content about being Filipino. They have more pressing problems to deal with than the aporias of identity. Unlike the early days of communism, when the proletariat was lionized, there exist very few noble images of the poor in Philippine society. The *masa* or the *bakya* crowd is an amorphous unthinking mob in the eyes of most newspaper columnists. They are blamed for electing the President. What can be more pernicious than the image of Juan Tamad, whose laziness is responsible for his poverty! With these

representations of the Filipino poor, why should they readily accept them as images of themselves?

Mangahas asks how much we know about local imaginations—unfortunately very little. This is the task of anthropology, a discipline that is not highly valued in the Philippines. So far, the state has concentrated in creating a national culture, including a national language, but has given very little attention to local differences. How many Filipinos think of the country as multicultural (not just multilingual)? Those who do consider this to be a problem for national harmony rather than a cultural resource.

Other than uninformed foreigners, of which there are many, I am not aware of Filipinos who claim that they 'lack culture'. Most Filipinos, unless they are rabid nationalists, and many of these are good Catholics or Marxists, proudly claim to have mastered or at least domesticated the colonizer's culture. I agree with Cannell (1999) that this strategy may date to pre-colonial days and that they express negotiations with power holders. However, Cannell's claim about the lack of a consciousness of tradition is more problematic. My own Ilocano informants also seldom claimed tradition as a justification for action. And yet some of their practices were clearly traditional (e.g. *komedya*, mortuary rites, marriage negotiations). They obviously didn't perceive them as such—they were not seen as reverential but rather as instrumental or as con-

temporary practices. In a sense, this should not surprise us. Giddens (1999), who is not known for his love of anthropology, has argued that tradition is an invention of modernity. Unfortunately, people like the Balinese may not agree. But if the Balinese don't have tradition, they certainly indulge in exegesis and hermeneutics about their own culture. However, Filipinos generally do not do so. In this sense Cannell is correct.

It is precisely because Filipinos deal with culture largely as a series of negotiations with or strategies about power that the problem arises. While much of culture does involve power, it is not simply reduced to it. If it were so than culture would not have any emancipatory potential. To return to Markus, the mastery of nature is only one dimension of the Enlightenment's understanding of culture. Its purpose is to overcome brute facticity. But another understanding involves the area of autonomous values. This is what I meant when I said that culture

allows us to aspire for an ideal of a better world. What this ideal may be, depends on the sort of culture we start from and on the creative genius of Filipinos. After all, even Rizal did not imagine a *Filipinas* where women and *baklas* would exercise full agency. Recto actually delayed the granting of voting rights to women! Presently, conservative forces are determined to prevent gays and lesbians from enjoying full civil rights. Unless Filipino culture changes, it will have little emancipatory potential.

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