ART AS LIFE: The Ifugao Bul-ul

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The famous Banaue rice terraces, carved into the Cordillera mountainsides by the Ifugao three millennia ago, underscore the paramount role of the rice culture complex in Ifugao life. The labor involved in carving the hillside terraces represents thousands of individual lifetimes. This vast effort graphically demonstrates the adversarial nature of the geography of this region and the tremendous odds faced by the Ifugao to assure access to food. These tenuous conditions set the stage for the bul-ul, the rice god figures that came to be a mechanism through which superhuman restraint became central to the production of a basic need. Physical survival is perhaps the most basic of human drives. In their marginal agricultural society, where the success of a harvest means the difference between a year of plenty and a year of starvation, the Ifugao have interwoven a powerful and sincere artistic statement with the need to perpetuate physical survival. Here, in a very direct way, art begets life through the focal point of the bul-ul, an expression of the Ifugao need to control the environment sufficiently to enable them to survive.

MATERIAL PROCESSES, MENTAL POSTURES

There are over 1,500 gods in the Ifugao pantheon, and a specific type exists for every aspect of life. The matung-ngulan ensure the welfare of animals, for example. The pil-le are watchdogs for property, the min-nahu regulate warfare, and the bul-ul control rice. The bul-ul is an anthropomorphic image, usually produced as part of a pair, carved by a senior priest-carver from sacred wood, most often from that of the narra tree (Pterocarpus indicus). Bul-ul are carved either standing or sitting, with a range of variations in the positions of the arms and hands. The head is large and often receives particular emphasis. More often than not there is a correspondence between the size of the rice field and that of its bul-ul protector. Areas with large, broad rice fields, like Hengyon, Banaue and Puitan, have large, stocky bul-ul. The terraces of Hungduan are not as large but have higher walls, necessitated by the steeper slopes of the higher mountains of the area, and the typical Hungduan bul-ul is tall with an attenuated body. Lagawe bul-ul are small, as are the terraces of the area. For the carving of a bul-ul, an auspicious sacred tree is located and cut in the forest, and the bul-ul is roughly blocked where the tree falls. The carving is completed near the house of the future owner. The ritual carving involves elaborate auspicious signs, rites, and procedures, accompanied by feasting for days on rice, chicken and pigs. All of this entails enormous expenditure on the part of the rice field owner who commissioned the carvings. Finally, the spirits of the bul-ul are coaxed to inhabit the figures through more rituals during which chicken or pig blood is applied to the images. The figures are then placed in a granary house or house attic, where they are believed to make the rice grains multiply and guard the harvest from vermin and thieves. Every harvest time, which is twice a year, the bul-ul are brought out to share the bounty of the harvest. They are believed to consume the non-material essence of the sacrificial rice, chickens, pigs, caribou, and rice wine, while the people eat the material part. The harvest ritual invokes the bul-ul gods, and some of the older and more important ones revered throughout the province are addressed by name. Some of these have retained the association of their names and are known to
survive today. Among them are Muninmin of Tud-dani, Kaloko of Nabyun, Naphek of Piwong, Kuntig of Pugu, Munlana of Montabyong, Ala-wa of Puitan, Kumpay of Cambulo, and Balulang of Cudog, all of which are preserved in private collections in Manila and Europe. Still in situ are Gamar of Hengyon, Dolidon of Mompolya, and Lablaban of Hengyon. Each has a rich history replete with the killing of rats, thieves, and even Japanese soldiers. Some are believed to have survived when their granary houses burned by jumping out and running to safety. Bul-ul lore makes an extensive and fascinating study worthy of thorough future investigation. On a superficial level, the role of the bul-ul as the focus of the agricultural complex can be readily seen, but their use in other aspects of Ifugao culture emphasizes their importance and influence. They figure prominently, for example, in peace and healing rituals. That this is so despite the 1,500 other named gods in the Ifugao pantheon indicates the extent to which the bul-ul permeate Ifugao life. That they are the only sculptural representation found universally throughout the Ifugao nation can only confirm their central importance in Ifugao culture. Having followed a path of development quite apart from today's analytical Western culture, the Ifugao, like other highland tribes, live in a world where a pantheon of gods, spirits, and ghosts--sometimes benevolent, sometimes vengeful--exerts control over humans and their world. The Ifugao have woven their religious culture around rites and rituals of propitiation which are intended to maintain order. In order to secure both health and harvest, the Ifugao must appease this pantheon by sacrificial offerings. In effect, the bul-ul functions as a symbol of the Ifugao psyche in its capacity as a repository of their fears and joys, and of the uncertainties of the harsh mountain life they have been contending with for centuries. Through its beneficence and power, the bul-ul regulates the variables of circumstance and guarantees the Ifugao a measure of control over the natural and man-made events that continually threaten their existence. Acting as a conduit between the earthly world and the Ifugao sky world, the bul-ul has made life, or a significant part of it, approachable, comprehensible, explainable, and to a certain degree, controllable. The bul-ul provides the means by which the mortal Ifugao can influence the force of the elements and the superhuman beings that control them.

SKILL AND CONTINUITY

Most, if not all, societies turn to the artist-craftsmen who are thought to create works that best embody the abstract ideas that underlie their spiritual beliefs. The mortal carvers of the bul-ul are steeped in the lore and legends of their tribal history. Through their knowledge and work they play a key role in the perpetuation of their culture through the hewing of a tangible, concrete, and visually reinforcing cultural beacon. Faithfulness to the accepted norms of representation is closely scrutinized by the community. Anyone commissioning a bul-ul must be greatly influenced by the way those around him view the rightness or wrongness of the final product. The realization of the conceptual is deemed successful if the final product is a tangible and credible representation of common beliefs. Such an effort reinforces the existing beliefs, ensuring continued confidence in their validity, and ultimately assuring the order and continuity of life and culture. Time and time again, the Ifugao have turned to the most skilled to represent the collective concept of the rice god. Proficiency in this means more than good woodworking technique. It also requires the ability to infuse the sculpture with an emotive power or presence that can be perceived even by those who do not share the same cultural background. The skill of the carver plays a major role in the final product, as does his psychological state during the harvest rituals when the bul-ul are carved. A time also marked by the consumption of large amounts of rice wine and charged with the euphoria of a successful harvest and the spiritual atmosphere of communing with the gods. The Ifugao have no "career" carvers. Bul-ul are carved by the older members of
the village, most frequently by those who have developed reputations as good carvers. All males start carving as boys, developing their facility with wood-working tools by sheer volume and repetition of work. The unwritten rules governing the forms of the bul-ul are learned as a young Ifugao boy tries his hand at utilitarian objects. Contrary to what one might expect, the carver is allowed certain leeway for individual expression, but only within circumscribed fields of variation. These strictures result in the preservation of the stylistic canon. The milieu in which most pre-1900 carvers worked can be only sketchily drawn because of the self sufficiency and isolation of each of the small villages. The accounts of Spanish missionaries and American colonizers shed little light on the subject, and valid field research efforts and relevant interviews are sparse. In a few rare cases, the names of individual artists have been identified, but the vast majority of the ancient carvers will never be known by their names. Research on them is difficult because of the absence of written records and the passage of time, as well as the destruction caused by religious conversion and colonial militaristic pacification. Both of the latter have been responsible for the destruction of many bul-ul, primarily through burning. Carving styles can be identified, and certain extant bul-ul are so similar in stylistic and structural terms that they can be confidently attributed to the same hand. The latter observation can sometimes be confirmed when the origin and age of the figures are both known and comparable. During the latter half of the 19th century and the first quarter of this century, several historically documented Ifugao carvers lived and worked. Foremost among these more recent carvers was Tagiling of Hengyon, who worked mainly in the small village of Kababuyan. His carvings are found mainly in Hengyon and environs. No records exist, but his surviving descendants say he was born in the 1870s and died in the 1930s. Tagiling is the most important figure during this period because, of all the known carvers whose names are associated with an extant body of work, he was the most effective at bridging the worlds of traditional and commercial art. The early part of his life coincided with the dawn of the tourist-oriented wood-carving industry in the region. This was the early part of the American occupation of the Philippines and there was an increased demand for tribal curios to be exported to the United States. A large corpus of the works of this remarkable carver exists, some of them still in situ. The distinctive bul-ul carved by Tagiling are characterized by realistically rendered features and anatomy. Eyes, eyebrows, nose and lips are finely carved, and the ears show faithful representation. A few pieces have eyes inlaid with seeds, bits of shell, or porcelain shards. The hair is pegged into the top of the head on older pieces and is both pegged and carved on later ones. The textile skirt or loincloth survives on some examples. Almost always made from the best narra wood, they show refined, smooth surfaces in areas revealed by the overlying crusty patina. Both sitting and standing figures were carved by Tagiling. The development of Tagiling's style can be studied by analysis of pieces carved in particular periods of his productive years. Initially, Tagiling's works showed stronger kinship with more traditional styles. The earlier carvings, presumably pre-1900s, show a style most in keeping with that of the carvers of antiquity. This style depicts the rice gods less naturalistically, with little of the surface consciousness that marks his subsequent works. Later on, increasing naturalism develops, and ultimately a stylization that may have been either an independent artistic development or a response to the influences of the vigorous commercial woodcarving industry. After a peak when his bul-ul were strikingly naturalistic, Tagiling's works became more stylized, and include a few items produced for the tourist trade such as bookends and decorative carvings. Despite his production of such commercial objects, at no point in his career did he carve a ritual sculpture that was without presence and visceral impact, nor was any of his work rough or transitional. His work shows no wavering nor uncertainty in its effectual truth to its primary purpose, and therein lies his greatness as a bul-ul carver. Tagiling's work stands between the more monolithic, elemental, and abstract "felt" forms and the more detailed and surface-conscious "seen" forms.
A SENSE OF TOTAL BEAUTY

In the Western view of Ifugao art, aesthetics—that is, art for art's sake—sometimes seems only incidental to the final sculptural product. The end result is perceived to be judged by the utility and efficiency with which a specific design performs a specific function, both physical and emotive—in a sense an aesthetic of function. This, however, is the judgment made by an outsider based on the close union between Ifugao aesthetics and the fabric of Ifugao culture. An aesthetic sensibility rooted in the totality of a lifeway is bound to be understood by an outsider only in articles that can be seen. A native of the culture appreciates aesthetic relationships everywhere, in the material and non-material, in the tangible and intangible. Bul-ul are the product of the unique historical development of the Ifugao, and it is a mistake to view them from any other perspective. When questioned, the Ifugao do not point out any specific sculptural or textural detail or decoration, but instead insist that a bul-ul is "good" because it "really looks like a bul-ul," or that it "looks fearsome like a bul-ul should." These statements indicate what might be referred to as an "invisibility" of aesthetics among the Ifugao. This does not represent an absence but rather a complete integration paired with an intuitive assumption that an outsider can see what they can. This quality of aesthetic integration is present in all aspects of Ifugao existence. It is intrinsic to dances, statuary proportions, and visual rhythms, but is also present in what the Ifugao feel and do in all the activities and thoughts of everyday life. The Ifugao, perhaps as a result of the spectacular scenery of the highlands, also have a strong sense of visual aesthetics. This may be manifested in a tendency to judge images by the effect of the whole on the viewer. Thus there is an emphasis on the efficacy of the artifact with regard to its purpose, rather than a preoccupation with its parts. With bul-ul, this relates to its perceived capability to protect and increase the rice harvest, and, more importantly on a subconscious level, its power to reassure the people by validating the socio-cultural structure that underlies all of their beliefs and actions. Admittedly, there are among the Ifugao those who prefer pieces worked with what would be, by their cultural standards, florid detail, but these are usually agents and dealers who, by the nature of their occupations, have learned to look at the rice gods the way prospective buyers would. They adopt the perspective of Western collectors who are accustomed to other artistic forms, such as those produced in Africa. A matter of style.

In the Nov./Dec. 1989 issue of Arts of Asia magazine, I proposed a subdivision of the Ifugao province into six stylistically distinct bul-ul carving areas: Hapao-Hungduan, Banaue-Mayaoayao, Lagawe, Hen-gyon, Kiangan and Tinoc. As with all pockets of human populations with various degrees of interaction, the border areas of these divisions exhibit a fusion of neighboring styles. Migrations and intermarriage have mixed the bul-ul populations of many villages, but generally this classification holds true. This division shows the backdrop of Ifugao culture through millennia of development, indicating enmity that kept interactions between particular groups to a minimum and resulted in the development of regional styles. Regional isolation extends not only to carving styles but to legends, epics, cultural elements, and even languages. Its seems fitting to start a discussion of regional styles with Hapao-Hungduan, an area that has inspired awe in both natives and collectors with its high level of creativity and woodworking virtuosity. Hapao-Hungduan is the site of the oldest rice terraces and, according to popular legend, was the home of the very earliest master bul-ul carvers at the dawn of Ifugao culture. The art of this region has always shown a preoccupation with the proportions of the human body. The depictions range from the most realistic to the most stylized, but in contrast to other areas where the sculptural emphasis is on the head and facial features, Hapao pieces show a more uniform interest in the body. Bul-ul of this area are predominantly standing figures with oversized hands carved in front of the thighs and knees. The
northern style within Hapao-Hungduan produces figures that are relatively stocky with bigger and wider heads than the southern style, which is associated with more attenuated figures with more naturalistic, youthful or infantile faces. Whatever the differences between the two areas, they are both characterized by a marked delicacy, fullness and sensuality of volume, beauty of proportion, and a roundness and fluidity of anatomy. The most abstract bul-ul come from the Banaue-Mayayao area. Faces are usually flat planes, with simple slits for the eyes and mouth. The rest of the features are depicted minimally, as if to direct the viewer's attention to the masses and volumes of the sculpture. The arms and legs may be carved with no consideration at all for precise anatomical detail in order to facilitate a clean and strong abstract representation. These bul-ul are usually seated, and their marked frontality as well as the forward thrust of the head and upper body produce an intimidating yet riveting sense of immediacy. Characterized by strong planes and volumes, and a masterly dissection of space, these monolithic pieces exude the powerful, visceral spell of the archaic bul-ul. There are no intricate details to distract the eye. The surface shows the marks of the primitive adze with which it was carved, imparting a dynamic but subtle sparkle that relieves the static mass of the bul-ul with a hint of animation, making it more real and immediate. It should be borne in mind when viewing such pieces that, far from being encumbered by a lack of technology, the master carvers of old wielded their tools expertly, and the resulting sculpture looked exactly the way it was envisioned. Theirs was a mastery that came from an ancient carving tradition and the requirements of ritual. The bul-ul looks as it should: monumental, forbidding, majestic, immediate, and drawn from deep reservoirs of great, mysterious power. The mere sight of them incites stirrings of primeval awe and reverent fear, probably the exact feelings that bul-ul were intended to evoke. This effect both reinforces the power of the bul-ul to protect the harvest and validates the belief system that led to its creation. A more naturalistic and surface-conscious sensibility predominates in Hengyon, where bul-ul are bigger and are rendered in heavy narra wood in both sitting and standing positions. Their impact is primarily visual, when compared with the more visceral impact of the Banuae-Mayayao pieces. The Hengyon pieces have a certain sculptural bravado and robustness as well as a marked preoccupation with surface features and anatomical curves. The relative naturalism of the Hengyon bul-ul are shared, at least to a degree, with the Lagawe rice gods. These, however, are seated, have flat, uncharted backs, and are tend to be smaller. Contiguous to three other Ifugao areas as well as that of another entirely distinct tribe, the Lagawe stylistic area reflects its substantial perimeter of creative interaction with a wider variety of styles than any of the aforementioned regions. Farther south, in the Kiangan area, standing pieces are the rule. The quality of artifacts in this area is compromised by often shoddy workmanship. There will, however, occasionally be truly superb examples rivaling the best the other areas can produce. Tinoc is the home of the Kalanguya subgroup of the Ifugao people. This region lies on the fringe of the present Ifugao nation and is bordered by lowlanders and other unrelated tribes. This relative geographic isolation has bred a style that departs most from those of the rest of the Ifugao. It is difficult to characterize the typical Kalanguya bul-ul, as they occur in a wide variety of postures and sizes. Given the complexity of the area in terms of intertribal relationships and intermixture, it deserves a separate study.
Presently numbering about 130,000 and embroiled in socio-cultural, economic, and political turmoil, the Ifugao are also coping with poverty, encroachment of lowlander interests, and the "Coca-Cola culture" brought about by the tourism industry. It is unfortunate that the word progress has often proven the death knell for indigenous lifeways. This lesson of history has been repeated worldwide, and continues with particular vividness in relation to the minority mountain tribes of the Philippine Cordillera. In the Philippines, as elsewhere, rather than making the Ifugao cognizant of their unique culture, education has instead promoted false values. Instead of instilling pride in their tribal heritage, it has made them ashamed of being members and carriers of their own culture and has significantly accelerated that culture's demise. Thus, most "educated" Ifugao look down upon their pagan and unschooled elders, unaware that they may be more complete with a single cultural identity than those who carry fragments of several. Further pressure for integration threatens the spiritual life of the Ifugao. In this place where spirituality has always been a part of everyday life, the inroads made by Christianity have led to a surrender of a significant portion of traditional culture. The legends, the rites, and the rituals that have traditionally fortified human existence are disintegrating and in the future will vanish, never to be chanted or sung again. The destruction of tribal culture, which has been an ongoing process since the coming of the Spanish missionaries, continues today, only much more rapidly and efficiently. At this very moment, rice god images are being burned, and with them a tangible reinforcement of Ifugao culture. Despite these pressures, and despite the corruption of Ifugao carving through the introduction of foreign iconography, bul-ul for ritual use are still being made today, albeit rarely and, by traditional standards, poorly. The long, unbroken line of bul-ul carving has deteriorated due to the gradual integration of the Ifugao into the mainstream Filipino Lowland culture, the conversion to the Christian faith, and the continuing fragmentation of the lifeways of the Cordillera. Carvers no longer believe as strongly in the existence and efficacy of the heathen bul-ul spirits, and thus cannot work on the figures with the same absolute and unquestioning inspired faith necessary to produce masterpieces. The desire to create art can never be extinguished. More often than not, art is enriched by strong social, psychological and emotional conflicts, which result in a breadth and depth of expression. The Ifugao, with his increasingly lost identity, is not in danger of losing his art. It is the subject matter rather than the creative impulse that is in danger of disappearing. Change is the constant of life, and growth may come in different forms. Who is to say that these changes are for the worse? But clearly the cultural milieu that inspired the creation of the powerful works of art we have examined has been irreparably eroded, and the days of the Ifugao master carvers of Bul-ul are long over.