Philippine Indigenous Art in Contemporary Times

This is an essay prompted by doing the laundry. Upon seeing the loads of long skirts and batik tops, the author subjected herself as a microcosmic representation of what we call ‘present generation’, tracing her interactions with indigenous traditions and cultures in various journeys, incidental immersions, online explorations, intellectual exchanges with books and films, and her long-contested vanity habit. Enjoy, an essay labandera style.

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By Avie Felix

As students of art, our college experience was made exciting by several field trips to Cordillera. Guided by our professors, we went to the mountains of Sagada and Ifugao to witness art and culture in the area. The trips complemented the ideas and concepts we got from art history books and videos. Those were educational and refreshing trips, I must say, but a few years after, recollecting half a decade beyond college, I see myself looking back and realizing I was too restricted by my romanticism before. I now realize that art history seemed to be a ‘glamour’ thing for me back then. Discovering the “primitive”, the “indigenous”, the “pre-colonial” seemed totally cool to me, and in all its coolness I was too bewildered to admit that more than the desire to discover our Filipino origin, I was too busy imagining a future art historian stature.

Several years after college (and I’d like to think those are several years of enlightenment), I once again had the chance to go on a journey to Ifugao, this time not as a tourist nor a student-spectator but a young artist on a ‘raket’ to survive.

Sojourn to the Terraces in yellow tag: Economics and Culture in the age of globalization

Kidlat Tahimik and Lopez Nauyac trailing the terraces. photo by Crown Dolot
Last May 2009, I worked on a team production for an AVP on Kidlat Tahimik as a part of a video resource project. Since Tahimik was documenting some rituals in Ifugao during that time, our production team accompanied him in Ifugao.

In Ifugao, I had the chance of meeting Mr. Lopez Nauyac, an Ifugao mumbaki of Sitio Patpat, Hapao. Manong Lopez is a woodcarver by profession, coming from a long generation of woodcarvers in the region. More than a decade ago, Mang Lopez migrated from Hapao to Lagaue. Hapao is a town after Banaue City while Lagaue is two towns prior to Banaue. Moving in to Lagaue was actually a tactical move for the Nauyacs to be able to reach their market better. Mang Lopez bought a land by the mainroad, set up his house and workshop there and displayed his carvings in the open for passing tourists to see.

Typical isn’t it? Considering a more feasible location in selling his works, or products, was a practical thing to do. But later on, spending a few days with Mang Lopez in the terraces where his family adopted us for 4 days, I discovered that stories like Mang Lopez’ in all its typicality comes as a lived illustration of the fate of indigenous cultures in the country. Here we see how economics intervene in artistic production and preservation of indigenous tradition. Considerations on marketability prompted woodcarvers like Mang Lopez to adapt styles, designs and mode of production to keep up with what the market (specifically local and international tourists) looks for. These adjustments continue on until much of what we see are very much different from what works of art like woodcarving were like during the time when it was just a practice of culture rather than bread and butter.

Speaking about the market, it is inevitable to talk about tradition and culture. There are a number of dying traditions in the country. This corresponds to death of forms, styles, motifs and what Alois Reigl calls *Kuntswollen*, or the “urge to create”. I am most particularly affected by that urge, that motivation to create works. In the perspective of indigenous artists like Mang Lopez, their reason for creating works of art is to earn a living. There is nothing wrong with that. What’s actually wrong in this matter is the expectation and negligence duality. We expect indigenous groups to preserve their tradition and keep their works as authentic and as truthful to their history. At times when our romanticism is disillusioned by the present actual condition of indigenous art, we at some point feel like the indigenous community fell into the temptation we dub as modernism and globalization, that the indigenous community is neglecting their history. The problem here is we put so much responsibility to our indigenous brothers and sisters to the point that we forget we are also responsible in helping indigenous tradition survive the threats posted to it by false modernity and the heterogenous project of globalism.

The “Artsy”Ecclecticism: Local Tourism as a form of cultural and artistic suicide

For a Manila-bred art enthusiast and cultural worker like me, indigenous sculptures, jewelry, trinkets, garments/textiles, bags, edible products etc. are eye-candies. I am so guilty of buying indigenous textiles for my clothes and bags and for some other decorative needs useful in the beautification of my workplace as well as my home. I frequent filipiniana shops like Kultura and
Balikbayan Handicrafts. I wear long skirts with primitive prints. I think I have come to acquire this lifestyle from my immersion to art and my deep interest in promoting indigenous culture. It’s an advocacy thing, I always tell my friends. But thinking it about it now, I think I am to a certain degree committing a mistake here as this interest develops into a vanity thing.

Last year, I was assigned to cover Project Runway Philippines for a local fashion magazine. Project Runway is a reality show in search of the best young fashion designer, a concept introduced in America vis-à-vis shows like America’s Top Supermodel or American Idol. I remember this project particularly because there was one interesting participant from the south, a young barrio dressmaker from Mindanao. He said in the interview that one of his reasons for joining the contest is to promote the tinalak. I expressed support in his vision but after some thought, I saw myself caught in a dilemma. If local fashion embraces indigenous art, textile in particular, in globally competitive fashion design, what will happen to indigenous weaving in the future?

In the same light, if we continue buying indigenous art for our decorative or vanity needs, aren’t we putting indigenous art in the level of commodity, much like SM Homeworld items and Kultura Apparel? This is not to say that it is completely wrong to buy indigenous products and use it for some form of function in our homes or for our ‘japorms’; there’s just a missing piece in this practice that we need to address very soon. When buying a T’boli bead earring, shouldn’t we also consult the books and check out the history of such piece of jewelry? In that way we don’t miss the importance of knowing our history.

There are two things that we have to keep in mind in buying indigenous products. One is sincere patronage to encourage a strong economy for indigenous communities to avoid further accommodations of foreign influences for the sake of economic survival. Secondly, we should no longer be local tourists to anywhere in the Philippines. When going to a province in any part of our country, we should not act like we are tourists trying to find the eclectic or the ‘unique’ in that area, feeding our romanticism with rotting western orientalism. We should make sure we are not implying expectations of either modernity or authenticity to indigenous communities because it further affects how they bring out their culture. For instance, if we pose so much pressure on the concept of ‘authenticity’, it’s inevitable that they uproot elements from their rituals and other traditions to bring something new to the market, therefore projecting authenticity in the basis of tradition.

When we are in the provinces, amongst our indigenous brothers and sisters, we are not there to take photos of ourselves for our facebook page. We are there to learn and discover how we can fit in and not merely how we can bring a piece of that place to our kitchen or maybe our scrapbook.

Indigenous Art: A Salvation Project

As I have mentioned, it is necessary for us to encourage more discourse on indigenous art to help revive concern, interest and support specially among Filipinos. Secondly, the government should be reminded that there has to be government support for the livelihood of indigenous communities. Other than using indigenous people for projecting an ‘identity’ of our nation, it
should be the priority of the State to make sure that indigenous communities are given decent living conditions and livelihood opportunities. Patronage to indigenous items should be increased, provided that we are sure to look at them as artworks not products.

Lopez Nauyac's home. photo by Crown Dolot

Last May 2009, a strong typhoon subjected the Nauyacs’ home to a landslide. Mang Lopez, in Kidlat Tahimik’s words, is now literally a cliff-hanger. There is still an increasing demand for Ifugao sculptures, but there is no concrete program from the government to ensure the safety of indigenous artists like him.