

By ZHUANG WUBIN

FOR YEARS, Alex Baluyut (b. 1956; Paco, Manila) has taken the older Sonny Yabao (b. 1943; Visayas) to task for his intermittent association with the Marcos administration (1965-1986). In defence, Yabao argues that it was then the only game in town. 'Most of the leading artists and photographers at that time must have somehow earned money from the government, unless you went up and hid in the mountains,' says Yabao. 'Some of us would receive commissions to shoot a modern farm in the north. You knew it was a Marcos project. The images were meant to promote our country abroad. You would shoot it, earn some money and get the chance to travel. Should you be called a propagandist just for doing so?'¹

But Alex Baluyut would have none of that. If there is anyone in the Philippines with the credibility to challenge Yabao, it has to be Baluyut, who stood firm and worked underground during the Marcos era. Despite their obvious differences, Yabao and Baluyut remain the cornerstone of Philippine documentary photography in terms of their influence, photographic approaches and the subject matters that they tackle. Many of the younger Filipino photographers, either consciously or otherwise, continue to tread in the shadows of Yabao and Baluyut. They are the Yin and Yang of Philippine photography.

Growing up in a small town in the Visayas, Yabao enjoyed literature and spent time reading the likes of Albert Camus, Joseph Conrad and most notably, Gabriel García Márquez. In college, Yabao pursued a diploma in English but eventually dropped out. In the late 1960s, he moved to Manila and found a job in a small commercial studio, developing negatives and making prints. Acquiring a hands-on knowledge of photography, he soon gravitated towards journalism to make a living. Like many photographers then, *Life* magazine was his bible. But it was the work of Henri Cartier-Bresson that made a lasting impression.

In 1973, after the declaration of the Martial Law, Yabao joined the Bureau of National and Foreign Information. He served as its chief photographer for two years. That stint turned him into a propagandist in the eyes of Baluyut. After the EDSA Revolution in 1986, Yabao worked as the photo editor at the newspaper Philippine Newsday before becoming a freelance photographer.²

His early work was more immediate, like *The Plight of Payatas* (1997-98), in which he trained his viewfinder on the largest dumpsite in Metro Manila. *With Memory of Dances* (1998-1999), Yabao started evolving.

The work examines the issue of cultural loss experienced by the native

The Yin and Yang of Philippine Documentary Photography

Sonny Yabao and Alex Baluyut



After working in the fields, the menfolk of Pao gather to smoke and exchange stories, from *Memory of Dances* (1998-1999) by Sonny Yabao



Palawan women prepare to disembark and join others in their protest of the takeover of the sacred sandbar by a commercial pearl farm, from *Memory of Dances* (1998-1999) by Sonny Yabao

peoples at Nueva Vizcaya, Coron and Mount Apo in the face of encroaching state and commercial interests. This erosion of traditional cultures is rooted in the loss of ancestral land. Not only is it a source of sustenance, ancestral land provides the context to the languages and rituals of these indigenous groups. The late 1990s coincided with a period of

introspection in Yabao's life. He started questioning his understanding of documentary photography, which he felt was too limiting. He found pure journalism to be somewhat meaningless because 'what you see is only what you will ever get'.

The driving force for change came partly from his earlier interest in literature. In the novels of Gabriel

Márquez, he found something parallel to the idea of the decisive moment coined by Cartier-Bresson, who was associated with the surrealists. Writing from images in his mind, the magic realism of Márquez can also be considered an offshoot of that art movement. What Yabao strives for in his current photographic practice is to combine social commentary and magic realism in a juxtaposition of reality and fantasy.

He elaborates further: 'What should be examined is the possibility of putting out photographs that are more than mere "documents". What I'm looking for are "normal" situations that hint at something else. You can't set it up. You wait for things to happen. But it's not a matter of how you do it. It depends on what is in your mind. You may not be attracted to a particular element in the scene but when it is placed against something else, the image

immediately becomes more interesting. The technique of juxtaposition is my major concern. Sometimes, it's down to a gesture, especially if you are into people. A gesture can make a great picture.'³

This change in approach is already evident in some of his images in *Memory of Dances*. The technique of juxtaposition that Yabao has so eloquently talked about is evident in an image of the villagers of Pao, Nueva Vizcaya, who had gathered for small talk after toiling in the fields. The picture has the quality of a snapshot, even though it is obvious that Yabao had waited for the visual elements to fall in place. The 'mystery' of the shot lies in the man seated behind two other villagers in the foreground. He seems utterly disconnected from the point of interest that had occurred beyond the photographic frame, something that had caught the attention of everyone else in the image. More than anything else, the picture leaves its viewers perturbed and curious.

In a way, it is possible to understand Yabao's urge to evolve as something that is informed by his inclination towards art rather than journalism. As he slips into his retirement years, the burden of raising a family is no longer present. While he says he will die a poor man, Yabao is also at a stage of his life where he does not want to please the clients anymore. He speaks of his desire to do projects of his own—to be like an artist.

'As an artist, you do not retire. You keep doing your craft. It's not a career but a way-of-life,' says Yabao.⁴

A few years back, he started *Villagers* (2006-), which is, in a way, an extension of *Memory of Dances*. By then, he had given up on analogue photography. Around 2005, while shooting an assignment, he realised he could not afford to buy film anymore. Digital technology has given him the possibility of concentrating on the process of making images without worrying about the cost of film. However, he is dependent on younger Philippine



Wedding at Payatas, from *The Plight of Payatas* (1997-98) by Sonny Yabao



Videoke Bar, Natonin, from *Villagers* (2006-) by Sonny Yabao



Middle-aged Ifugao trying to teach children the native dance, from *Villagers* (2006-) by Sonny Yabao



Prisoners raise arms in surrender, as Deputy Warden Calderon and prisoners Daang and Caayan lie dead, from *Brother Hood* (1993-94) by Alex Baluyut



Higaonon Farmer, Mindanao by From *Gikan sa Area* (1997-2000) by Alex Baluyut



MILF muslim rebels, from *Kasama: A Collection of Photographs of the New People's Army of the Philippines* by Alex Baluyut



Bagobo Ritual, Magpet, Mount Apo, from *Gikan sa Area* (1997-2000) by Alex Baluyut

photographers to help him 'process' his images in Photoshop.

The desire to juxtapose social commentary and magic realism becomes a full-blown obsession in Villagers. Even though he did not grow up in a village, Yabao situates the work on a personal level, calling it a revisiting of an era when life was still simple in the archipelago. It was an era prior to the current phase of rapid globalisation. There was not much to buy and families produced their own food.

At that time, his grandfather owned a farm in the village. Whenever it was the harvesting season, Yabao would visit him and have a happy time there. Growing up in a small town, his parents had a *sari-sari* store. While keeping an eye on the convenience store, his mother would also cook for students and make dresses. As Yabao recalls these details, it becomes obvious that there is a thread of nostalgia that runs through Villagers. But that does not mean that he has shut his eyes from the changes that have come to the villages. In fact, these contradictions seem a perfect fit visually with his artistic direction.

Alex Baluyut, on the other hand, locates his photographic practice in the tradition of humanism that he picked up from old copies of *Life* magazine. Ironically, it is the same reference point that Yabao has turned to throughout his career. What subsequently set them apart is the diverging ways that they have interpreted that humanistic tradition. While Yabao gravitated towards the artistic vision of Cartier-Bresson, Baluyut found his beacon of light in the uncompromising work of American photojournalist W. Eugene Smith (1918-1978).

As a photographer, Baluyut is more hardnosed and less interested in the ethnographical concerns that underscore Yabao's work. It is not surprising if he dismisses Yabao's idea of combining magic realism with photography as something utterly pretentious. There is also a part in Baluyut that hates Yabao's politics and resents his former association with the Marcos administration. When Baluyut first burst into the scene, he had only one thing in mind—to do the kind of work that Smith did for *Life*. He joined Associated Press (AP). His monthly salary, including overtime pay, amounted to around 4,000 pesos, a considerable sum then.

However, after three years at AP, he was getting restless. When the opportunity came for him to cover the New People's Army (NPA) down south in Mindanao on a four-month self-funded 'assignment', Baluyut jumped on it. He took the separation pay of 7,000 pesos and left for Mindanao in 1981. Due to the censorship in place during martial



Communist rebels, from *Kasama: A Collection of Photographs of the New People's Army of the Philippines* by Alex Baluyut

law, Mindanao was an area of darkness. Baluyut knew that the NPA was waging an insurgency in the country's second largest island. But the papers had almost nothing to say. The occasional article would run for two paragraphs, reporting, for instance, an ambush that killed 13. The less they knew about Mindanao, the more it fed the imagination of Baluyut and his peers. If anything, he had to see it for himself.

Baluyut had always been sympathetic to the NPA's cause. Documenting the revolution on their side made him into a socialist. At that time, it was very dangerous to shoot in Mindanao. In the jungles, mortar, grenades and gunshots went off around him. Throughout his work, he saw a lot of deaths, including the execution of a fellow comrade suspected by the NPA to be an agent. He was fortunate enough to stay in safe houses with some of the poorest but nicest people he would ever meet in life. They taught him the intricacies of Mindanao culture. But the Left would eventually turn against itself and kill off these harmless villagers, recalls Baluyut in bitterness.⁵

When he returned to Manila after working in Mindanao for three months, Baluyut had a lot of images but nobody knew what to do with them. Marcos was still around and the climate of fear was still prevalent. All he could do was to store the images away.⁶ In 1985, when human rights activist Lenny Limjoco arrived from America with a grant to publish a photo book on the Philippines, the idea for *Kasama: A Collection of Photographs of the New People's Army*

of the Philippines quickly took shape. To add to Baluyut's work in 1981, Limjoco photographed the NPA in the north, a less volatile region at that time.

In 1987, a year after the fall of Marcos, *Kasama: A Collection of Photographs of the New People's Army of the Philippines* became the first photographic monograph to be given the National Book Award. The accolade meant that Baluyut would always be associated with conflict photography. It is an unnecessary burden.

The years that followed after winning the award, Baluyut worked intermittently for different papers and for AP. In the early 1990s, the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ), knowing very well that Baluyut would not shirk from any assignment, offered him a grant of around 60,000 pesos to do a story on police brutality in Manila. It was the first time PCIJ had given a grant to a photojournalist.

For the next six months, Baluyut hung out at the Western Police District headquarters at United Nations Avenue, photographing an institution that seemed almost indistinguishable from the mafia. Nothing was done clandestinely in *Brother Hood* (1993-94). Baluyut went through the official channel and was given access, just like any police beat photographer. However, the cops could probably sense that he wasn't exactly a police beat reporter. First of all, unlike the photographers who covered the crime beat, he shot without a flash, pushing his 400 ASA film to its limits. The officers were

also perturbed when he photographed them in 'unorthodox moments'.⁷ Nevertheless, they still let it all hung out. Clearly, the cops didn't feel that they were doing anything wrong.

Through the viewfinder of his SLR, which he borrowed from a wire agency, Baluyut saw underage children being picked up simply because they looked vagrant, cops mauling first-time homicide suspect Rolando Pingca, and officers taking over the drug trade in Manila. There is no attempt at heroism in *Brother Hood* because the scenarios and anecdotes are real. This is not cinema. There is no need for setup. The world, as portrayed in *Brother Hood*, is one in which anybody could be 'taken right off the street or be killed like a dog for no reason. His rights are not sacred'.⁸ The 'climax' of *Brother Hood* arrives in the form of the Manila City Jail riot on 26 November 1993. Prior to that, Baluyut had already shot

many incriminating images of the police force. He adds: 'The people at PCIJ liked those images but they kept asking me, "Where's the blood?"'⁹

On that fateful day, he knew in his gut something was amiss. He took more rolls of film and brought along Buena's camera, which had a flash. When the riot broke out in the evening, Baluyut was ready. As it turned out, inmates Elpidio Caayan and Buenaventura Daang had got hold of a WWII grenade, which had been smuggled into the prison during the Christmas party. With the grenade, they took a baby and deputy warden Edgardo Calderon, who was chief abuser at the Manila City Jail hostage. In the end, the SWAT team would open fire, killing the inmates and the warden. Baluyut documented the entire standoff and the incident provided closure to the book. Published by PCIJ in 1995, the book was obviously critical of the Manila police force. And yet, it was also sympathetic to the trying conditions that the cops had to battle with on a daily basis. It is a powerful body of work precisely due to the balance Baluyut had achieved in the end. The book registered record sales and won Baluyut his second National Book Award that very year.

Gikan sa Area (1997-2000), Baluyut's third body of work, is set in the protected areas of Mindanao, a region that has remained close at heart since his work on the NPA. However, violence was still shimmering when Baluyut revisited the restive region. But the focus of *Gikan sa Area* is on the lives and the vanishing cultures of the indigenous groups. The nature of the work is ethnographical, not unlike that of Yabao's *Memory of Dances or Villagers*. For Baluyut, it was also a getaway from conflict reportage. And he would try his hands on colour photography on the last trip that he made for the project. The result is an intimate portrayal of a region beyond the headlines of violence. With the work, he has come full circle in his association with Mindanao.

FOOT NOTES

¹ Sonny Yabao, interview by author, Manila, the Philippines, May 22, 2009.

² Sonny Yabao, e-mail message to author, July 30, 2010.

³ Yabao, May 22.

⁴ Yabao, May 22.

⁵ Cristina Luisa Sevilla, *The Unanswerable Questions of Alex Baluyut*, Documentary Photography Philippines, <http://documentaryphotographyphilippines.blogspot.com/2009/01/alex-baluyut.html>.

⁶ Nana Buxani, *A Photographer's Life 2*, undergroundpix, <http://www.photoblog.com/undergroundpix/2010/06/14/a-photographers-life-2.html>.

⁷ Alex Baluyut and Gemma Luz Corotan, *Brother Hood*, ed. Sheila S. Coronel (Pasig, Metro Manila: Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, 1995), 3.

⁸ Baluyut, *Brother Hood*, 4.

⁹ Alex Baluyut, interview by author, Manila, the Philippines, May 16, 2009.