Strangers in their Own Land: The Marginalization of the Philippine Indigene

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The Philippines is a nation with exceeding linguistic and cultural diversity, having origins from the Neolithic expansion of Austronesian-speaking peoples into the archipelago, and enduring in the face of Spanish and American colonization in the modern era. The region is home to 169 distinct, ethnolinguistic communities – the Cordillera Administrative Region alone contains the Tinggian, Kalinga, Gaddang, Ifugao, Kankana-i, Isneg, Bontoc, Ibaloi, and Ilocano (Hirtz, 2003). Yet, in spite of their diversity, these various groups can tenably be divided into two halves, that of a "mainstream," Westernized Filipino identity that accounts for the demographic majority, and a minority made up of "indigenous," non-Westernized groups. It can also be debated that this mainstream majority and indigenous minority are split in more ways than the scope of demographics alone, with the latter enjoying cultural, economic, and political primacy in Philippine society.

The question thus arises as to why and how this cultural stratification of Philippine society came to be. In considering all of this, the colonial experience of the archipelago's native population undoubtedly played a large role in the construction of the current Philippine social order, with the divide between "mainstream" and "indigenous" made most evident through the processes of racial othering and hypersexualization ushered in by Western colonization, and the continued economic repression of indigenous groups in modern Philippine society.

It is undeniable that the linguistic diversity of the Philippines already existed prior to the arrival of Western colonial powers to the region. At the arrival of the Spanish to the islands in the 16th century, colonial officials were already reporting making contact with groups such as the Tagalog, Ibanag, or Ilocano (Bellwood, 1995). Regardless, it can be argued that it was the Spanish presence in the islands that deepened if not created all together the notion of the

indigenous "other." If anything, the Spanish reified ethnic lines where there may have been none. In his work, "It Takes Modern Means to be Traditional," Frank Hirtz explains that the Spanish colonial regime had an interest to qualify and quantify their new, Philippine subjects, and thus individuals were assigned to groups based on their linguistic affiliations (Hirtz, 2003). The encapsulation of large populations within discrete and explicitly laid down categories undoubtedly made colonial administration easier.

However, the demarcation of ethnic boundaries alone was not responsible for the birth of the indigenous other, as the superimposition of European *whiteness* on native society played an even greater role. To begin, the idea of *whiteness* as an aesthetic is drawn from John Dewey's experiential ideologies. To Dewey, aesthetics, as internalized by the individual, dictate the individual's conceptualization of humanhood, beauty, the meaning of life, and so on (Alexander, 2002). In terms of the Philippines, the Spanish brought with them the idea of their superiority over native Philippine populations who they saw as barbaric, uncivilized, and even sub-human. The mere essence of civilized humanity was therefore trapped and closely guarded within the Spaniards' European aesthetic – their *whiteness*. The culturality and physicality of being European thus came to represent in the native mind the definition of being human itself, which they thought best to adopt and emulate given the socio-politically Spanish-dominated society.

It would thus be plausible to argue that it was through the aesthetic of *whiteness* that the divide between mainstream and indigenous came to be. The pressure to conform to European ways, to become more *human*, more civilized, allowed for the creation of a Westernized, pan-Filipino culture that became more and more disapproving of groups who resisted westernization. Though this mainstream culture itself was born from the welding together of disparate ethnolinguistic groups by way of a common Catholic religion and Hispanicized culture, this pan-ethnicity of sorts was cemented as it elevated and segregated itself from neighboring, non-

Westernized ethnolinguistic communities which came to be seen as backwards, uncivilized, and stuck in time.

The rift between the mainstream culture and indigenous groups would seem to only grow wider come the American occupation. The United States took possession of the Philippine Islands in the early 1900s following the defeat and subsequent expulsion of Spain from the archipelago after the Spanish-American War (Bacdayan, 2009). To justify its political and armed presence in the Philippines, the United States pledged to pacify, Christianize, and civilize the region and its disparate peoples (Bacdayan, 2009). Through this, the American public developed a fascination for the Philippines' indigenous peoples, and mock tribal highland villages, complete with infrastructure and inhabitants, were publicly showcased in American fairs and carnivals throughout the early 1900s (Cardova, 2009). Notably, American media at the time had a special fondness for advertising Filipinos, mainstream and indigenous, as primitive and half naked, with a particular focus on the bare-breasted highland *belle* (Cardova, 2009). This, in turn, did not ring well with the Westernized Philippine population, which saw the bare-breasted, half naked media representations of Filipinos as deceptive and scandalous, and misrepresentative of the "civilized," Westernized peoples of the archipelago (Cardova, 2009).

Painting the bare-chested Philippine indigene as a *hypersexualized* being was in no doubt American propaganda in maintaining its claims over the Philippines as a wild and rapacious country in need of taming. This is reminiscent of the wider feminization and sexual objectification of the so-called "Orient" by the West in reimagining the East as virgin land awaiting the civilized guidance of European virility (Kang, 1993). Indeed, the nudity of the Filipino was, as bluntly stated by Allan Punzalan Isaac, a "visual metaphor for the definition of Pinoys [Filipinos] as racial and historical others, exploitable and stripped of the habiliments of dignity" (Isaac, 2006). Yet, it must be noted that the United States came to occupy a Philippines

that was indignant of further Western colonization, and the hypersexualized image of the Philippine indigene was repudiated by the mainstream Filipino population that wanted to remind the United States of its Westernized lifestyle, and therefore its civility and readiness for self-rule (Isaac, 2006). Thus, there was greater incentive for the mainstream Filipino pan-ethnicity to disassociate itself from the seemingly immoral and backwards, bare-chested indigenous Filipino, creating for an even wider cultural and political divide between the two groups. In essence, the rejection of the hypersexual indigene served to perpetuate the image of indigenous peoples as historical and cultural others in the psyche of the mainstream Filipino culture.
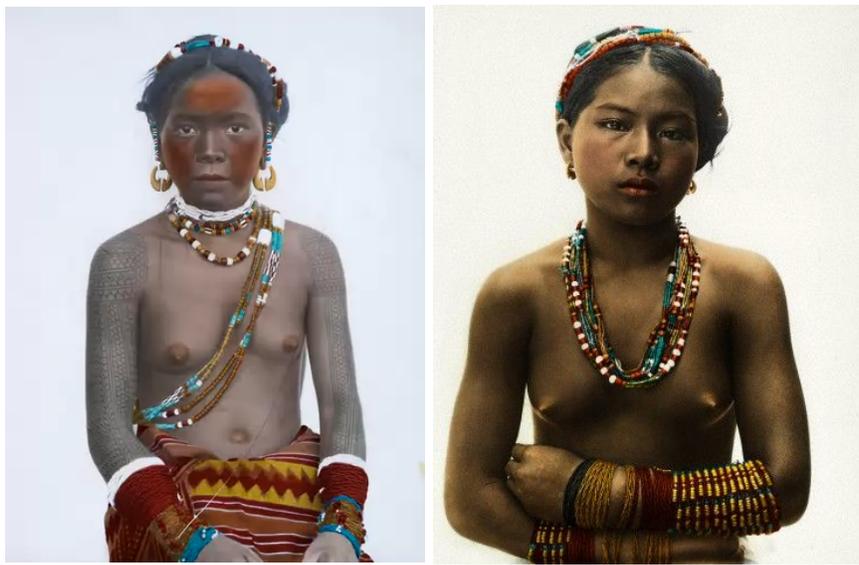
Left: A Lubuagan Kalinga woman showing her tattooed arms Right: A young Tinggian woman in mourning; it is a custom among Tinggian women to shed their top garments when in mourning. Both photographs originate from the early 1900s. (Worcester, 1913)

In hindsight, the American occupation, and to a much larger extent, the Spanish colonial period sparked the cultural and social tensions that engendered the division between a Westernized, mainstream identity at odds with an aboriginal, indigenous minority. Debatably, this is a rift that continues to be maintained in the Philippine social order of today, one that is most apparent through the scope of economy, particularly in terms of the neoliberal ideals that have penetrated the policies of the national Philippine government.

As the Philippines in recent years has pushed for more liberalized trade and investment policies in promoting the expansion of both domestic and private sectors, it has also diverted significant efforts towards cultivating a more robust cultural tourism industry (Bello, 2009). The neoliberal understanding of people being a "social capital" of sorts has encouraged the intensification in the visiting of cultural sites, both by domestic and international visitors, cultural sites that are often part of the cultural patrimonies of indigenous Philippines groups, such as the Banaue Rice Terraces of the Ifugao people (Bello, 2009). With this, in terms of the Philippines as a neoliberal actress, it can be argued that indigenous minorities and their cultures have come to be envisioned as marketable assets. After all, cultural artifacts such as folk art, music, and fashion are all viable commodities in domestic and global markets.

Regardless, with the neoliberal belief in the individual's dignity and in the equal access to entrepreneurial and economic opportunities for all (Bello, 2009), it would seem that the Philippine indigene has a substantial amount of agency in the increasingly neoliberal Philippine state. In response, though the growing cultural tourism industry may be encouraging the movement of capital into indigenous areas and providing sources of income for indigenous families, the commodification of indigenous culture is nonetheless reflective of how marginalized and othered Philippine aboriginal communities are. Their popularity in Philippine cultural tourism accentuates the fact that mainstream Philippine culture perceives the indigene through a lens of exoticism, as if indigenous societies were foreign nations wedged into the territorial patrimony of a Westernized Filipino nation. Moreover, cultural tourism has emphasized the indigene's markedly different cultural practices, religion, and ethnic dress, thus helping to solidify the image of the non-Westernized indigenous person as an unrelatably ethnic and cultural other. Lastly, the neoliberal belief in the equal opportunities for economic success for all undermines the fact that indigenous areas in the Philippines, such as the Cordillera

Administrative Region, account for the greatest rates of poverty in the nation (Rovillos & Morales, 2002), where the distribution of capital, and thus entrepreneurial opportunity, is *far* from being leveled and equalized.

Ultimately, it is the consequences and implications of the mainstream-indigenous divide on contemporary Philippine society that must be taken into greater consideration. The neoliberal leanings of the Philippine government and the cultivation of cultural tourism have shown that the idea of the indigenous other has been conflated with the notions of social capital and the market, thus leading to the commodification of their cultural patrimonies. The poverty found in indigenous areas also hints at the political, cultural, and economic primacy of the Westernized, mainstream Philippine pan-ethnicity over the historically marginalized indigene. The question of how and why this mainstream-indigenous dichotomy came to be may thus not be the most important question to pose. Perhaps, it is more worthwhile to recognize the cultural dynamics that allow this divide and the marginalization of indigenous people to continue. The answer, however, may ultimately be rooted, again, in *whiteness*.

Introduced during the Spanish colonial period, the aesthetic of *whiteness*, it can be argued, *defines* the mainstream Filipino identity. Through conversion to Roman Catholicism and Hispanicizing their native cultures to conform to Western ideologies of beauty, modesty, civility, and humanhood, the mainstream Philippine culture has, in essence, assumed the role of the Westerner that the Spanish left behind. The mainstream Filipino has thus *become* the Westerner, the holder of power over the natives, viewing Philippine society through the framework of imported *whiteness* as opposed to native Philippinic culture. As a consequence, the Westernized Filipino finds the indigene, one who has historically resisted Western influence and colonization, to be unrelatable in experience, point of view, and cultural history. Perhaps, this is the reason why the Philippine government can promote cultural tourism, putting its indigenous peoples on

display, much like how indigenous Philippine highland groups were put on display in American carnivals and fairs in the early 1900s. Here, the indigene has become the observer, if not the victim of the Westernized culture's socio-political power.

The marginalization of indigenous peoples in the Philippines can thus be understood in the scope of the mainstream society's possession of power and its endeavor to maintain this power. According to Michel Foucault, power is "that which represses. Power represses nature, the instincts, class, and individuals" (Foucault, 1980). It can be said then, that the mainstream culture's castigation of indigenous peoples as backwards and stuck in time is a reflection of the former's cutting off of *whiteness* – power – from the latter. Repressing social and economic mobility among the indigenous population therefore perpetuates a society wherein the Westernized enjoy a cultural framework of social and cultural preeminence. As holders of power, the mainstream society thus has the additional interest of maintaining the status quo, done through outward demonstrations of this power, such as in furthering the exotification of indigenous groups under the guise of cultural tourism, or the outright repudiating of the indigene for being a hypersexualized, immoral being. It is as Foucault asserts, the "basis of power lies in the hostile engagement of forces" (Foucault, 1980).

In the end, the mainstream-indigenous divide in Philippine society puts the region in a complex and precarious situation, especially in terms of governing a nation that is as linguistically and culturally diverse as the Philippines. It can be said that Philippines is presented with the feat of managing a pluralistic nation-state, one that respects the humanity, dignity, and rights of all its citizens, all the while being haunted by the socio-cultural scars of its colonial past. Could such a diverse, multiethnic nation ever truly exist without a dynamic of power divided along ethnic lines? Perhaps that is a question for another time.

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