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Domesticity, Spirituality and the Igorota as Mountain Maid

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My paper is a critical study of images of the Igorota in various Philippine texts, from literature and history to popular visual forms. Informed by postcolonial theory, the short story *Sam-it and the Loom* by Filipino writer Lina Espina-Moore may be read as an attempt to depict how American women fit into the colonial design in the Philippines, the Cordillera in particular. I argue that the representation of the Igorota in the story encapsulates what Filipino historian Vicente Rafael calls “colonial domesticity”, or the assumption that in constructing ‘home’ in the tropics, “the structures of the public and private are mobile and indefinitely reproducible, capable of translation across cultural bodily spaces” (Rafael 2000). It would thus be interesting to look at how American women manoeuvred into the public and private spheres where the Igorota figured prominently. This will allow me to foreground the Igorota’s cultural and spiritual negotiations in the light of her colonial past and in the midst of an increasingly competitive global present.

Fiction and Colonial History

My paper is part of a critical study of images of the Igorota in various Philippine texts, from literature and history to popular visual forms like the photograph, postcard and print advert. In the short story *Sam-it and the Loom* by Lina Espina-Moore, I focus on the Igorota's spirituality. Espina-Moore's narrative may be read as an attempt to depict how American women fit into the colonial design woven in the Philippines, the Cordillera in particular. I argue that the representation of the Igorota in this story encapsulates what Filipino historian Vicente Rafael calls "colonial domesticity," of the assumption that in constructing 'home' in the tropics, "the structures of public and private are mobile and indefinitely reproducible, capable of translation across cultural bodily spaces." Moreover, Rafael adds that domesticity is marked by ambivalence that "alternately enables and disabled the construction of the uneasy divide between the public and the private in the empire" (Rafael 2000). It is thus interesting to look at how American women manoeuvred into the public and private spheres where the Igorota figured prominently.

Sam-it and the Loom is part of a collection of a dozen short stories in *Cuentos* (all succeeding references are to this edition), written between 1958 and 1980 and published in 1985. Author Espina-Moore is a fictionist and journalist who belongs to the post-Second World War generation of Filipino writers in English. She was married for 17 years to C.S. Moore, an American lumber company executive. During this time, she lived in the Central Cordillera provinces and wrote novels and short stories in English and Visayan (language of peoples living in the Philippine Visayan islands). Espina-Moore was born and raised in Cebu City, southern Philippines.

In the story, *Sam-it*, a young Igorota seeks refuge among the weavers of the Episcopalian Women's Workshop in the city of Baguio after her husband, Dakyon had taken another wife because "she did not bear him children." Her weaving skills improved immensely at the Mission looms but her supervisor Miss Jean Brown later facilitates her employment with the Allens, an American couple residing in Baguio. Mrs. Matilda Allen teaches *Sam-it* many Christian ways. But upon the untimely demise of Mr. Allen, *Sam-it* witnesses her mistress' spiritual disintegration.

Colonial Domesticity and Spirituality

Rafael posits that American women who wrote in and on the Philippines during the early part of the American colonial rule invested colonialism with "a sense of the domestic and the sentimental" (Rafael 2000). Interestingly, this is evident not only in their letters and memoirs but also in the fiction of Filipino writers like Espina-Moore who may have witnessed and perhaps even countered their voyeurism in colonial gaze. I also argue that spirituality plays a major role in the colonial investment, oftentimes infused in/with the domestic and sentimental.

After her perceived failed marriage to Dakyon, the young *Sam-it* seeks solace in the American constructed leisure space of Baguio, "among the Christians," where capitalism had crept into supposedly sacred institutions like the Episcopalian Church. In the guise of domesticating the native, the Mission Workshop capitalized on the Igorota's weaving skills by teaching her "to weave on the more complicated *Ilocano* loom." This allowed for the use of more colours and designs which were a hit with the tourists. *Sam-it* becomes adept at either the Igorot or Ilocano loom, so "visitors [would stop] longest with her to watch her weave."

The domesticating act was a shared commitment among the American colonial rulers, so the most promising subjects had to be 'nurtured,' whether in the public sphere of the Mission Workshop or the private home of American expatriate couples like the Allens. Following the

metaphor of entrepreneurship, Miss Brown ‘loans’ Sam-it to the Allens because Matilda is “a good woman and an excellent mistress”, but she informs the young girl that she is free to return to the Mission if her private employment proves unfavourable.

The body is vital in the creation of an ideal domestic space. The servant becomes “a copy of the domesticated white body [of his/her mistress] while at the same time appears[s] radically different and distant from that body” (Rafael 2000). Mrs. Allen is responsible for Sam-it’s cultural crossdressing. She gives her housemaid her

...first American dress, a middy blouse with a pleated skirt which reached down to the ankles...a muslin slip, muslin bloomers, white cotton stockings and tennis shoes (Espina-Moore 1985).

In codifying the Igorota’s body “as it should be”, Mrs. Allen was applying the prevailing discourse of the female body as a temple of modesty, decency and morality that sought to instil order in the colonial scheme of things. Notably, this is evident especially among the supposed unclad and filthy natives like the Igorots. Apart from habiliments, domesticity included aping the bourgeois lifestyle of the typical white American family. It should be noted, however that many Baguio and even Manila resident Americans were “not originally reared in wealth” and thus only too quickly “took to bridge tables, drink and *amahs* [nannies]” (Sams in Cogan 2000). Mrs. Allen makes it her business to let Sam-it hear the houseguests complimenting the mistress of the house for masterfully training her servant to prepare biscuits, ginger cookies and tea. Sam-it may have expertly followed the baking instructions but her reward of appreciation is of no much to her mistress’ whose mentoring skills are incomparable. Even the leisurely act of reading is dominated by the mistress. Sam-it’s prized possessions included a copy of *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* and *Little Women*, chosen by the mistress perhaps because of their uncontroversial content and proliferation of prim and proper female characters.

Domestic acts were infused with lessons in spirituality to emphasize the coherence and stability of the colonial design. Mrs. Allen swiftly lectures Sam-it on the primacy of Christian marriage when she learns of Dakyon’s initiative to win back his former wife. She expects her maid to wear American clothes during Sunday Church services to signal her effectiveness as a Christian mistress. Respectability in white American middle class society meant having a firm grip on domesticity and spirituality in both public and private spheres.

The Loom: Appropriation and Spirituality

The loom is the central image in the narrative. First, it identifies Sam-it with her indigenous Cordillera culture. As a skilful weaver, she was familiar with the “primary colours and geometric designs of her people.” Second, the loom signifies Sam-it’s adaptability. She had no difficulty adjusting to the loom of the lowland variety. As a colonial subject, the Igorot native became adept at weaving together the strands of pagan upland and civilized lowland cultures.

More importantly, the loom is symbolic of Sam-it’s appropriation of the American colonial encounter. Appropriation allowed for the acquisition of foreign influences but at the same time provided ample space for the native to make necessary adjustments for her personal interest and satisfaction. To illustrate, Sam-it knew how to tell time, the Western way. Mrs. Allen had taught her how. But she continued to rely on her instinct:

...it was simpler to look up through the kitchen window where in summer months teatime was when brilliant sunlight touched the treetops (Espina-Moore 1985).

When Mr. Allen dies in an accident at the mine sight, his wife is devastated:

...she stayed in her room for many days without seeing and talking to anyone. No one saw her cry. Not even Sam-it her broth and tea thrice a day (Espina-Moore 1985).

The colonial order was patriarchal in nature. As Rafael points out, “[e]mpire building historically has been associated with popular projects for the reconstruction of manhood in the United States.” But in the domesticating mission, the chief agents were white women, “charged with the duty of upholding middle class morality and respectability amid the barbarism of a colonized people” (Rafael 2000). And in carrying out such duty, dependency on the native was paramount.

With the spiritual foundation of her private sphere gone, Matilda Allen succumbs to spiritual deterioration:

...she screamed and pulled her hair. Then she flung herself on [Mr. Allen’s] bathrobe on the floor. She screamed, cried and mumbled. She pushed and squeezed her face into the bathrobe (Espina-Moore 1985).

Sam-it takes matters into her hands. She affirms her dual spirituality: “I, Sam-it [am] both Christian and pagan.” She seeks audience with a *mambunung* (native doctor-priest) to drive the *anito* (spirit) out of her mistress, even offering herself as intermediary should the spirit be that of Mr. Allen. Cordillera studies scholar William Henry Scott points to how Christian reformers have attacked indigenous paganism as “a religion of unreasoning, unreasonable, and pauperizing fear,” yet he is quick to add that “the daily life of the faithful pagan does not give the immediate appearance of uncertainty, apprehension or terror, on the contrary, the pagan faces the world of frightening uncertainty with a great deal of confidence and psychological poise” (Scott 1969).

After Mr. Allen’s funeral, Mrs. Allen becomes more reticent; even the visits of Miss Brown whom Sam-it regarded as the *mambunung* of the Christian God are futile. When mistress tells servant that Mr. Allen had come in the night and that she would soon join him, Sam-it is not surprised. She performs the functions of her dual spirituality when she finds her mistress dead the following morning. She sings “Rock of Ages,” a classic Church hymn, delivers a traditional chant in praise of the kind couple and tells the spirits that a *cañao* feast will be held for them in her village and finally performs a cleansing ritual of passing over a blade of grass over the eyes, ears and mouth of her mistress.

The discovery of Matilda Allen’s ‘bundles’ of dog ears and the skeleton and feathers of a bird complete with the animals’ life histories unnerved Miss Brown and the other Church ladies. They realize their failure as spiritual mentors in the public sphere, prompting Miss Brown to ask, “What right have we to be making new Christians when we have no patience, no heart, no time for our own?” Suddenly, to Sam-it, Miss Brown was a *mambunung* no more. Ironically, it is Sam-it, the native housemaid who in her appropriation of Christianity effectively feels the position of spiritual confidant.

Image of the Mountain Maid Magnified

In the end, I pose the question: how did the native Igorota see her subject position? Historical accounts of white women privilege their voyeuristic and colonial gaze in representing the Igorota. But the colonial eye/I of white American women failed to comment on a return gaze from the colonized (Holt 2002). Sam-it may have been silent but it is this very silence that provides a fitting answer to Gayatri Spivak’s query of whether the subaltern can speak. Sam-it returns the gaze by appropriating deed, not

word. Espina-Moore's narrative offers us a window of opportunity to witness Sam-it's return gaze. Though she herself is not bereft of contradictions, neither is she a mere saccharine mountain maid (pun intended).

'Mountain Maid' is the label of a popular product line of jams, jellies and other mountain produce established by the nuns of the Good Shepherd Convent in Baguio City. Through the entrepreneurial skills of the good sisters, Mountain Maid has become part of the city's iconography. Domestic and foreign tourists simply must purchase even just a jar of *ube* (purple yam) or strawberry jam or a canister of peanut brittle or angel cookies when they visit Baguio to bring as *pasalubong* (homecoming gift) to friends and relatives.

Semiotically, the label embodies the lot of Sam-it and other Cordillera youth after American colonization. These Igorot youth have been educated and Christianized by foreign and local authorities. The Good Shepherd sisters in particular began with a residential program that administered to six Igorot girls from Mines View, Baguio City in December 1952. Originally conceived as a catechism class, the program to be what was later known as the Pelletier Hills School, an accredited institution that offered elementary and high school education for girls. Mountain Maid as a cultural symbol began with a musical group of twenty Igorota teenagers who called themselves the Mountain Maids. Sister Mary Rosary Bonifacio, the *impresario* of the group discovered the musical talents of the girls and had other professionals and volunteers hone these talents. Soon the group was performing beyond the gardens of Pelletier Hills. The sisters saw this as an opportunity through which the girls could "portray their very own cultures and values for the entire world to appreciate." For the sisters, wearing native costumes and singing songs of "peace, homeland and humanity" was a step toward self-representation because it taught the girls "how to be critical of both [foreign and local cultures]" (Bacaltos and Mendoza 2002).

However various shifts in vision and mission led to the closure of the school. Instead, it came to be known as Pelletier Hills Residence, which catered to or served as 1) group living for girls in need of protection but not rehabilitation; 2) temporary shelter for girls and women in crisis; and 3) a hostel for college students and working girls (Bacaltos and Mendoza 2002). After the 1990 earthquake that rocked Baguio City and other Luzon provinces, another developmental shift led to the establishment of the Mountain Maid Training Centre (MMTC) whose motto became "winning with inferior resources: a superior strategy for helping the poor" (Bacaltos and Mendoza 2002). Thus was born Mountain Maid's new cultural and entrepreneurial symbol.

Interestingly, the work force of the MMTC consists of Cordillera youth whose education is subsidized by the sale of the products and who, as the Good Shepherd sisters had envisioned in the nineties, would render community service to their provinces of origin upon graduation. Yet the gigantic tarpaulin poster portraying smiling Igorot lasses and lads clad in their respective provinces' native garb belies any growth in their self-representation. Apparently, their exotic mountain culture continues to be their main selling point, not their accomplishments or what they are trying to make of themselves. Unwittingly perhaps the good sisters, in their imagined affinity with the Cordillera native, have literally drawn from these young people's cultural capital to market their food products. It is interesting to note that in taking the entrepreneurial term, the MMTC emphasized the spirituality of the project proponents. In their project proposal they cited, among other reasons:

They [the sisters] were offering a product [strawberry jam] made by the hands of religious, a product characteristic highly appealing to Filipinos who consider anything touched by religious to have been blessed (Bacaltos and Mendoza 2002).

But the hands that actually toiled were those of the mountain maid. In a sense therefore, the culture of the mountain maid and now her male counterpart have been commodified

to meet the expectations of the local and even global consumer. The logo, conceptualized by Sister Mary Assumption boasts a crisp, no nonsense linguistic product marker. However although it does not capitalize on any other visual exotic appeal, such as the stereotypical image of an Igorota, costume and all, it, by its sheer simplicity and straightforwardness, nonetheless signifies domesticity and the pastoral idyll.

In the realm of literature, Sam-it, like her loom, is able to negotiate every “warp and woof” of her hybrid culture and spirituality. Perhaps it is time the mountain maid and lad be allowed to leap beyond the advertising frame to foreground their negotiations, their own ‘warps and woofs’ amidst an increasingly globalizing scenario.

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