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Mercene, Tara Renee Masangya, "The Stars Told Me About You: Reclaiming Filipino Mythology Through Film" (2022). *Media and Cultural Studies Honors Projects*. 10.
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The Stars Told Me About You

Reclaiming Filipino Mythology Through Film

By

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An Honors Thesis

Presented to the Department of Media & Cultural Studies

Macalester College

Saint Paul, Minnesota, USA

Advisor: Dr. Tia-Simone Gardner

April 19, 2022

Introduction

The more interesting stories are the ones that are not found in books, but the ones that have been passed on from family to family, generation to generation.

-Budjette Tan, *Trese* (2020)

The Philippines holds a long history of colonization and occupation from Spain, Japan, and the United States of or (the US) . Today, the Philippines is heavily influenced by Western culture, holding ideologies paralleling their past colonizers. For this project, I would like to explore the culture of pre-colonial Philippines and how it is reviving itself in the present, which I frame as the post-colonial. Looking specifically at Filipino folklore and mythology I am interested in understanding the scars of colonization and how lore and rituals have sought to heal these pasts through its remembrance of traditional thought. In this moment we can witness the production of post-colonial Filipino culture through mythology/folklore in present-day media. As a media making project, I am thinking about the ways my own work contributes to this postcolonial moment. I am interested in the ways that experimental media such as *Bontoc Eulogy* (1995) and *Trese* (2021) have been utilized by Filipino animators and media artists. Through Marlon Fuentes work in *Bontoc Eulogy*, he demonstrates the emotions of his heritage and recounts his grandfather's experience in the St. Louis World's Fair. As Budjette Tan, the author of *Trese*, states, it is the stories from generations back, stories that stem back to our indigenous roots that are the most compelling. Through my research and film project, I examine the question, is Philippine folklore a possible form of healing from colonization, and how has it become a pathway, through art, to their pre-colonial beliefs?

History/Context

Pre-Colonial Philippines

For this project, I define pre-colonial Philippines as the period before the early 1520s before any expeditions from the Spanish. This pre-colonial time frame does not exclusively mean that there wasn't any external cultural influence from surrounding countries, but that it was a time before any forced intrusions.

During the pre-colonial period of the Philippines, the country consisted of various tribal groups operating with their own characteristics of customs and beliefs, and with an overall belief system that respects nature. In contrast to the surrounding Southeast Asian countries, the “absence of monolithic cultural structure and/or a centralized geopolitical authority” gave freedom and independence to each of the tribal groups, creating a strong “fabric of ethnic identity around the ancient values of ‘primitive liberty.’”¹ The Philippines also produced “diverse patterns of ethnic narratives, epics, ballads, riddles, proverbs, and symbols.”² This was evident during the introduction of Islam to the Southern Philippines and Central Luzon, two centuries before the Spanish arrival of Christianity. Despite its nature to provide a “loose framework for political and cultural unity” and “emergence of a supreme political authority in the person of the sultan,” there were no transformations to the ethnic communities’ arrangements.³ Rather, the sultanate resolved the absence of arrangements for resolution of conflict, and it would seamlessly intertwine into the communities’

¹ David Joel Steinberg, *The Philippines: A Singular and Plural Place*, 4th edition (Boulder, CO: Routledge, 2000), 14.

² *Ibid.*, 15.

³ *Ibid.*, 16.

cultural traditions and belief system of babaylanism, the ancient Filipino shamanistic religion.⁴ Within this time period, foreign religions and practices were not seen as a threat, and were welcomed to be incorporated.

Post-Colonial Philippines: Spanish Colonization

As previously stated, pre-colonial Philippines did not entirely signify a period of solitude, but was a time of natural development between babaylanism and the country's neighboring cultures. It is no wonder why Ferdinand Magellan and the Spanish explorers would be met with confusion when Rajah Kolambu told them that Filipinos "did not worship anything but raised their face and clasped hands to heaven and called their god Abba."⁵ This term's translation would vary depending on the area of the country.

Magellan's Spanish expeditions and religious missionaries would ultimately end this time of self-development within the country and begin what I term post-colonial Philippines. Along with the inception of resource exploitation on the islands, Magellan and his crew would instill the celebration of the Mass upon their landing in Cebu, ultimately converting Rajah Humabon and his people to Catholicism.⁶ The Spanish would rule over the country for centuries, leading to such an infusion of cultures that it would be difficult to know what would be indigenous or not. Filipino folklore and pre-

⁴ Kathleen Nadeau, "Aswang and Other Kinds of Witches: A Comparative Analysis." *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 39, no. 3/4 (2011): 253. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23719118>.

⁵ William Henry Scott, *Barangay: Sixteenth-Century Philippine Culture and Society*, 1st edition (Manila, Philippines: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1997), 79. Original source of quote is from: Antonio, Pigafetta, 1524b, *Primo Viaggio intorno al mondo*. 126.

⁶ Steinberg, *The Philippines*, 92.

colonial religious practices and beliefs would be suppressed by Catholic tradition, leading to the priestesses and shamans slandered and maligned by friars in an effort to “negate the power of these women” and transpose “shamans into witches to discredit them.”⁷ The Spanish colonization devoted higher impact on the Philippines’ religious beliefs and their centuries-long act of eradicating Filipino mythology and lore. Even through the American regime which I discuss below, Christian culture would be “absorbed and propagated by a large segment of Filipinos,” demonstrated by “assimilation in art, architecture, sculpture, painting, music, rituals, manners, and habits of life.”⁸

Post-Colonial Philippines: American Imperialism and Japanese Occupation

After the 1898 Spanish-American War, the Philippines would be passed onto possession by another Western nation, the U.S. The U.S.’s impact on the Philippines began through political and military occupation that would ultimately lead to an overall assimilation to American cultural values. The imperialistic system of the U.S. would help them “preserve its special and dominant position in the Philippines economy” as well as “insure such [a] position through the deepening dependency of the Philippines on U.S. economic assistance.”⁹ The U.S. would eventually work from the grounds up, creating the University of the Philippines to mold the next national leaders. Learning English would be required, causing the “growth or development of a Filipino language, particularly Tagalog, which was beginning to be used as a larger medium of communication, [to become] stunted and eventually

⁷ Nadeau, “Aswang and Other Kinds of Witches: A Comparative Analysis,” 254.

⁸ Steinberg, *The Philippines*, 16.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 123.

subordinated in importance.”¹⁰ A division of classes would grow out of the new education system, leaving traditional values to be regarded as primitive and inferior.

The dependency of the Philippines on the U.S. would become even stronger as the U.S. would promote themselves as a savior to the Filipinos for their aid in fighting against the Japanese occupation during World War II. During the Japanese occupation, there was a revival of pre-colonial and indigenous beliefs, through *komiks*, the equivalent of comic books. Although the U.S. introduced *komiks* with the comic book form first, it was also the reason why the comic industry ended in the Philippines, with prolific writers and illustrators lured to the U.S. for opportunities.¹¹ Manga specifically, would be imported to the Philippines and turn what would originally be a source of entertainment into a way to cope with the trauma of the war and Death March. *Komiks* would become an escape for Filipinos, creating a space involving elements of the real world and represent them in their stark simplicity: “the indio (colonial subject) fought the haughty español (Spanish colonial master), the medieval warrior battled evil forces, the faithful lover man defeated his rival in a duel.”¹² These characters would be portrayed through what would be seen as ordinary men and women--essentially retelling their stories of colonization and imperialism. Almost all *komiks* and characters bear some amount of American ancestry however there are important exceptions—those directly derived from Filipino folklore consisting of myths, epics, legends, and folktales.

¹⁰ Ibid., 126.

¹¹ Soledad S. Reyes, “The Komiks and Retelling the Lore of the Folk.” *Philippine Studies* 57, no. 3 (2009): 390. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42634017>.

¹² Ibid., 404.

These comics draw on Filipino storytelling that precedes Spanish, US and Japanese colonization. Soledad Reyes writes that *komiks* have become “unthinkable without our recognizing their deep indebtedness to the rich lore of the common people, the texts through which our forefathers sought to make sense of their lives and thus engage complicated reality.”¹³ Despite the origins of *komiks* from the country’s colonizers/imperialists, its content and imagery are embedded in Filipino indigenous culture.

On the other hand, it is also significant to point out that post-colonial Philippines could be potentially falling into another form of control from their colonizers. The country could be putting themselves into a “new form of colonialism which is called ‘neocolonialism’ in which the colonized has become the instrument of their own new bondage.”¹⁴ It’s a complicated situation of understanding exactly what is beneficial or not for the country as it moves on from centuries of colonization and imperialism. This leads us into the utilization of folklore and mythology into media as a form of possible healing and portal for Filipinos to decipher unconscious trauma.

Literature Review

The field of Filipino mythology and folklore is elusive and stark. Aside from the collection of Filipino mythology and folklore from authors such as Damiana L. Eugenio’s *Philippine Folk*

¹³ Ibid., 394

¹⁴ Steinberg, *The Philippines*, 193.

Literature (2002) series¹⁵ and Francisco Demetrio's *Dictionary of Philippine Folk Beliefs and Customs*¹⁶ (1970) and *The Soul Book*¹⁷ (1991) along with Gilda Cordero-Fernando and Fernando Nakpil Zialcita, there are only a handful of other works that serve as a reference and collection. Collectively the authors do an excellent job at collecting Filipino folklore stories from multiple regions of the Philippines as well as organizing them into the various types of Filipino folklore themes such as cosmology, creation stories, etc. Separately, the collections lack a concise description of the multiple deities mentioned in the lore which made it difficult to fully follow through with the lack of character context.

Within Damiana L. Eugenio's seven-volume series *Philippine Folk Literature*, we see the author explore the range of lore within Philippine folk literature such as *Riddles* (2005), *Proverbs* (2016), *Epics* (2018), *Legends* (2020), etc. Each volume of Eugenio's series gives a deeper look into the three groups of Folk literature: folk narratives, folk speech (riddles and proverbs), and folk songs. Eugenio describes folk narratives as "traditional literature that tell a story in prose or in verse."¹⁸ Myths, legends, and folktales would fall under this category, and within that are subsections of the types of legends. Legends can either be etiological or non-etiological, with etiological type explaining the origins of geographical features, animals, flowers, and names, and the non-etiological type revolving around "heroic legends (about great men); religious or saints' legends; legends about the punishment of great sin (e.g., sunken city legends); and legends about the various supernatural beings that Filipinos

¹⁵ Damiana L. Eugenio, *Filipino Folk Literature Series*, 7 vols. (Quezon City, Philippines: University of the Philippines Press, 2002-2020).

¹⁶ Francisco Demetrio, S.J.: *Dictionary of Philippine Folk Beliefs and Customs*. Foreword by Wyland D. Hand. 4 volumes, pagination in sequence 992 pages. Xavier University, Cagayan de Oro City, 1970.

¹⁷ Francisco R. Demetrio, Gilda Cordero-Fernando, Fernando N. Zialcita, and Roberto Feleo. *The soul book*. Quezon City, Philippines: GCF Books, 1991.

¹⁸ Eugenio, *Filipino Folk Literature Series*.

believe in (elves, fairies, mermaids, aswang, cafre, tikbalang, tianac, engkanto, buso, tamawo, ghosts, the devil).¹⁹ Of note, is that the texts are written in English, making it incredibly accessible to those in and outside the Philippines as English is the country's second official language, and represents a great number of ethnolinguistic groups.

Similar to Eugenio, Francisco Demetrio's *Dictionary of Philippine Folk Beliefs and Customs* is a collection of multifaceted lore in terms of chapter divisions by Folk Medicine, Natural Phenomena, Omens, Prayers, etc. The text differs to the extent of mythology and folklore as Demetrio's focus isn't as in depth as Eugenio, who dedicates a volume to specific Filipino lore categories, and is rather an overview of the type of folk practices that intersects with folklore.

The subject of Filipino folklore and mythology has sparked contemporary interests. In 2021, the *Diccionario Mitológico de Filipinas (Dictionary of Philippine Mythology)*²⁰ (2021) by Ferdinand Blumentritt which was originally released in 1895, was republished by the Aswang Project. While the original text was published in Spanish, the new edition is translated from Spanish to English.

Blumentritt, an author and teacher from the Czech Republic, is known to have close relations to Jose Rizal, the national hero of the Philippines, and sought to create the dictionary out of the belief that "there exists no work, [major] or minor, dedicated specifically and especially to the study of the religion of all the indigenous races of the Philippine Archipelago." Despite this passion and relation to the Philippines, Blumentritt has also never visited the Philippines, which raises questions on the

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ferdinand Blumentritt, *Diccionario Mitológico de Filipinas (Dictionary of Philippine Mythology)*. Aswang Project, 2021.

methodology and accuracy of his work. Furthermore, the work has been published and edited by Jordan Clark, the founder of the Aswang Project, who fell into controversy for hiding the fact that he is White, and not Filipino.²¹ Given that information, I believe there holds more aversion and question of credibility to the dictionary as a reputable source within this field.

Studies of analysis for specific Filipino mythology and folklore are equally as scarce as collections. Demetrio along with his work of collecting lore has also analyzed them in his article of *Creation Myths among the Early Filipinos*,²² in which he argues that Filipino mythology, as indigenous as they may be, holds influence from global mythology and folklore such as Indonesia and Greece. Kathleen Nadaeu's *Aswang and Other Kinds of Witches: A Comparative Analysis*, takes this further into account in analyzing more specifically the lore of Filipino witches, or the *aswang*,²³ and its connection to the Hindu, Balinese, and other Southeast Asian religions, and less likely from any Spanish influence from colonization. Opposing arguments have also been made within Megan C. Thomas' *Orientalists, Propagandists, and Ilustrados: Filipino Scholarship and the End of Spanish*

²¹ Multiple sources have come out in outrage at Jordan Clark and the Aswang Project, mainly stating that he purposely tried to hide his white identity from Filipino authors and artists who've reached out to him and the Aswang Project for wanting to collaborate with a fellow Filipino. See Elsa Valmidiano, "How the Founder of The Aswang Project, Jordan Clark, Infiltrated Our Sacred Ancestral and Academic Filipina/o/x Space," *Slicing Tomatoes*, May 14, 2021, <https://slicingtomatoes.com/2021/05/14/how-the-founder-of-the-aswang-project-jordan-clark-infiltrated-our-sacred-ancestral-and-academic-filipina-o-x-space/>.

²² Francisco Demetrio, "Creation Myths among the Early Filipinos." *Asian Folklore Studies* 27, no. 1 (1968): 41–79. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1177800>.

²³ An aswang is described as shape-shifting half-headed female viscera suckers with bulging eyes and lolling tongues, who fly by night searching for victims, especially pregnant mothers and infants, who they followed to America, where Filipinos continue to wear sacred amulets and make ritual offerings and prayers to ward them off. See Nadaeu, "Aswang and Other Kinds of Witches: A Comparative Analysis," 250–66.

Colonialism,²⁴ who firmly claims that Filipino folklore and mythology cannot be clearly separated from Spanish and Catholic ruling. Thomas argues that Filipino folklore is ambiguous to Spanish folklore, as there is not a clear answer to what exactly “Spanish” meant in early Filipino lore accounts. However, these arguments raise the question of what is considered authentic and pure of what Filipino folklore is. The topic of authenticity is one that the field of folklore studies has moved on from, considering how counterproductive it is to resolve as there is no absolute standard to constitute what is Filipino folklore.

Furthermore, in terms of work in relation to Filipino folklore and mythology to the media, a lot of the work specifically speaks within the medium of *komiks* (comics). Soledad S. Reyes mentions in *The Komiks and Retelling the Lore of the Folk*,²⁵ how the basis for *komiks* writers are looking at the history and legends of culture for their present-day publications. With this basis, Reyes argues that through *komiks*, specifically, heroic *komiks*, readers are able to view the past and its values through a framework of the present moment. Anna Camille V. Flores’ wrote similar argument in *Comics as Third Space: An Analysis of the Continuous Negotiation of Identities in Postcolonial Philippines*, arguing that the interconnection of Filipino lore within *komiks* creates reimagined communities and renegotiated identities that “represent how Filipinos are inhabiting hybrid worlds and hybridized

²⁴ Megan C. Thomas, “Practicing Folklore: Universal Science, Local Authenticity, and Political Critique.” In *Orientalists, Propagandists, and Ilustrados: Filipino Scholarship and the End of Spanish Colonialism*, NED-New edition., 97–140. University of Minnesota Press, 2012. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.cttts6w2.7>.

²⁵ Soledad S. Reyes, “The Komiks and Retelling the Lore of the Folk,” 389–417.

identities.”²⁶ Flores utilizes the framework of the third space and hybridity from Homi K. Bhabha, believing that the “juxtaposition of an imagined Philippines that has been heavily influenced and shaped by Western powers ever since the colonization period is a renegotiation; an acknowledgment of a past that included these mythological stories but at the time same time contextualization of these stories as part of a schema that makes up the Filipino psyche at present.”²⁷ Flores focuses on *komiks* such as *Trese*, which has recently been made into a Netflix anime.

Methodology

For this project, I explored the presence of work surrounding Filipino folklore and mythology, as well as dissecting the medium of art that it is usually found in, *komiks*. Firstly, I wrote a short research-writing project about the history of Filipino folklore and mythology and what academics have argued and discussed within this topic.

The final project is a creative project of my own. I produced an approximately 25-minute pilot of a Filipino fantasy drama inspired by the Filipino folklore of how the Sun and Moon separated. Specifically, I combined the versions of this story, from Tagalog to Tiruray, to inspire the drama, with the key points of their stories’ being that the Sun and Moon separated due to differences in taking care of their children and of the strain of the Sun’s heat on having the ability to hold his children. The

²⁶ Flores, A.. "Comics as Third Space: An Analysis of the Continuous Negotiation of Identities in Postcolonial Philippines". World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology, Open Science Index 146, International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences (2019), 13(2), 110 - 114.

²⁷ Ibid, 101.

drama's characters are named after various Filipino deities, with their character's background and story symbolizing the original folklore.

My final project falls fluidly between the genres of ethnography, experimental, and narrative as its main basis stems from a compilation of lore from communities in the Philippines from various regions, while at the same time curated and displayed in a fictional narrative. As Trinh T. Min-ha, a Vietnamese filmmaker, points out about her film work, the genres of a documentary, seeing from the outside-in, and fiction, seeing from the inside-out, overlap. The idea of blending the factual and fictional, creates a third space as mentioned previously that I hope to create through this project. The story of the drama will be placed in a world where the possibility of mythical powers can be held and gained, but with the familiarity of present reality.

Conclusion

In conclusion, my research and creative project around Filipino mythology and folklore is a vital contribution to the field and genre of Filipino folk literature and ethnographic, narrative, and abstract film. The film creating process demonstrated a healing process between the cast and crew by providing a space for each other to bond over Filipino food and the sharing of personal family lore. The field of Filipino mythology and folklore continues to be inaccessible and limited, in terms of materials and references, as well as its practice in the media. My project fills the gap in the lack of Filipino mythology and folklore within the medium of film and will hopefully expand to more episodes. This will additionally be significant for Filipino Americans to have a look into Filipino

indigenous culture, and away from the mainstream Western culture that is displayed in the Philippines today.

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