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Herminia Meñez Coben

Verbal Arts in Philippine Indigenous Communities: Poetics, Society, and History

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Book Reviews

HERMINIA MEÑEZ COBEN

Verbal Arts in Philippine Indigenous Communities: Poetics, Society, and History

Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2009. 392 pages.

Herminia Meñez Coben's *Verbal Arts in Philippine Indigenous Communities: Poetics, Society, and History* presents a fascinating study of the verbal arts, social life, and histories of ten Philippine indigenous ethnolinguistic communities, each one corresponding to the major chapters that comprise the book, namely Isneg, Kalinga, Ifugao, Kankanay, Mangyan, Subanon, Bukidnon, Bagobo, Tausug, and Sama Dilaut.

What binds these ten chapters is the “centrality of verbal art, and the central role of verbal artists, in social life,” thus showing how crucial these artists are in “shaping . . . the course of history” (1). By carefully observing and recording verbal poetic utterances such as “proverbs, riddles, ritual boasts, chants, myths, epics, and other forms of verbal art” (1), Coben convincingly demonstrates how these indigenous communities not only preserve, protect, and shape their own traditions and collective destinies, but also participate dynamically in the shaping of a nation's history as they critically engage the larger world outside their territories. Furthermore, these indigenous communities not only celebrate through these aesthetic practices communal events such as victories over their enemies, headhunting forays, and the like, which an uninformed outsider would normally assume they are solely concerned with; they also confront broader issues and challenges such as

“ecology, gender, ethnicity, and social class” in a way that perhaps would surprise the uninformed outsider (359).

For instance, in the case of the Kalinga, Coben describes how, “by mobilizing tradition to bear upon contemporary issues,” the verbal artists perform a “politicization of such communicative genres of daily life” (84). She offers the following riddle as an example of “the political struggles to protect their ancestral rice lands from destruction by governmental and corporate modernist projects” (84):

Affrom:	Guess what it is:
Payao ko usak-or	My rice field below,
Arak na pinacha-or	Its irrigation has gone crazy
Uray sino nga tufo	No matter what is planted,
Achi mafalin tumufo.	It will not grow.
	Answer: Pipe [Suako]

In the age of environmental crises, of disasters and catastrophes, before which we proffer solutions, recommendations, and competing theories in environmental ethics and strategies in disaster risk management, Coben presents to us another beautiful example of an indigenous community’s mature, balanced, and grounded (that is, to the earth on which they build their lives) stance toward the natural environment, in this case the river as the site of both life and death for the Subanon (201):

Miboat raw si Yobo	Tinayobo arose and
minangay ri dongawan	walked to the window
midongaw medolampi	to look out to the sea,
na ming'long to dagat	to the sea she looked,
minolindap to ma-asin	looked out to the sea;
misogat raw matan'n	she saw with her eyes
ki manin matag g'ndao	something like a sun
to pisi-isipan no dlangit	on the horizon of the sea
pisompayan ginalak	where the sky and the sea met;
nga raw egin so g'ndao	before the sun moved
gampalas'n maita	she could clearly see
ki sakayan raw gadiyong	large ships of war,
ki dlolan raw galila	warships at sea

ginoyod na ri dagat	dragging upon the sea
biniklas de ma-asin	dragging upon the brine,
ki talo pingagongan	the sound of gongs echoing,
ki deya pidlogondigan.	the gongs of war resounding.

For their part, the verbal artist from the Sama Dilaut community expresses the way they struggle with the tension between one’s homeland and foreign shores, between the calm security of the rural and the often exhilarating attraction of the city, between staying and leaving (346–47):

Katulak ni Manila	When I go to Manila
Sakayan Bangka-bangka	Aboard a banca
Pag ambal na kita tanda	When I no longer see you
Atay kun a magkubla-kubla.	My heart will pound with fear.
Tenes kinambaya bai taga Jalidua	Tenes, don’t be sad (Lady of Jalidua)
Tula ni Sabah baka alarma lama	When I leave for Sabah
Kita ilu karua umbal na mag-unda sadya	We will seldom [sic] each other
Tabanaka dangan-dangan na.	And you will be left alone.

The painstaking work of Coben should help us avoid taking a patronizing stance toward these indigenous communities, or at best a romanticization of their life and their poetry, which could easily lead us to draw facile conclusions about a parallel relationship between the two. Thus, it is important that Coben issues a precaution, in the example of the Subanon, against similar unwarranted conclusions as she points to the complexity of such relationships (228).

While it is true that many, if not all, of these indigenous communities have long suffered and continue to suffer marginalization and oppression by the dominant forces from within and outside the Philippines, it is only a part of the truth of these peoples. With the fascinating work of Coben, one that surely could have been done only by the most passionate and rigorous scholar, we are granted a glimpse into the vibrant and dynamic truth of the life of these communities, one that is at once broader and more profound. In an age such as ours when, as Heidegger observes, “there rages round the earth an unbridled yet clever talking, writing, and broadcasting of spoken

words” (“Poetically Man Dwells,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Alfred Hofstadter, 213; Perennial Classics/Harper Collins, 1971), keeping the verbal arts of indigenous communities alive not only allows us to discover wonderful worlds other than ours. It may also help us to look into our own worlds, and enable us to realize how language indeed is the very soul of a people, and that its source is poetry.

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JOHN NEWSOME CROSSLEY

Hernando de los Ríos Coronel and the Spanish Philippines in the Golden Age

Surrey: Ashgate, 2011. 244 pages.

To scholars of Philippine history, the name Hernando de los Ríos Coronel is most likely to ring a bell. His is a familiar name, but many will have a hard time recalling who exactly he was. At most, they will remember De los Ríos from his letters and memorials published in Antonio de Morga’s *Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas* and in Emma Blair and James Robertson’s *The Philippine Islands*, where he brings to the attention of colonial officials problems in the Philippines and the surrounding region. Other than that, almost everyone will draw a blank on his life or even the personal circumstances behind his letters and memorials. John Newsome Crossley’s book on De los Ríos fills this gap in our knowledge and gives life to the man behind the words.

Doing the biography of a person who lived four centuries ago is not the easiest of tasks, even in the case of a relatively important person in Spanish Philippine society. Crossley had to follow the tracks left behind by De los Ríos in libraries and archives in different countries from Australia, United States, and the Philippines to Spain and the United Kingdom. Readers who are used to biographies of famous persons whose every move and motivation are accounted for might be slightly disappointed by this book since there are noticeable gaps in the life story of De los Ríos, such as where in Spain he was born, why as a soldier he decided to become a priest, what happened during his unaccounted for years during his second stint in the Philippines, and in what year did he die. That basic biographical questions are left unanswered has nothing to do with the quality of the research but more to do with the lack of extant materials. Crossley’s detective skills extract as much information from the primary sources as possible without going overboard with fanciful speculation. The life of De los Ríos still comes alive in the mind of the reader. De los Ríos was one of those Renaissance men of the early colonial era; he was a pilot, navigator, mathematician, scientist, priest, and lobbyist.

Crossley’s strategy is to follow the life of De los Ríos as it was inextricably linked to the history of the Spanish Philippines in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. After a couple of introductory chapters that center primarily around the colonization of the Philippines, each succeeding chapter in the book focuses on one stage in the life of De los Ríos. As a soldier