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Commentary

RAUL PERTIERRA

Anthropology and the AlDub Nation Entertainment as Politics and Politics as Entertainment

The links between politics and entertainment in the Philippines are well known, but few have noted these links in the media phenomenon known as AlDub. As a subpart of *Eat Bulaga*, a long-standing midday TV show, AlDub has gained a life of its own, giving its actors national and even global prominence. How was this possible? Was it happenstance or do basic interests and structures explain its popularity? A deep ethnographic account of how popular culture is generated, reproduced, and consumed reveals its anchoring in material structures the interests of which are often disguised or unacknowledged. Anthropology provides a way of exploring such interests and structures.

KEYWORDS: ETHNOGRAPHY · POLITICS OF FANDOM · HEGEMONY · MATERIAL CULTURE · TECHNOLOGICAL MEDIATIONS

Much has been written about the extraordinary popularity of the *Eat Bulaga* episodes known as AlDub. This phenomenon is part of the popular long-standing midday television program and involves formerly unknown actors who unexpectedly developed an onscreen romance that has since almost taken on a life of its own independent of the original TV show. AlDub followership has been likened to a religion, involving feelings of devotion and fulfillment, including a sensitive and defensive response to criticism by mainstream critics. Literary scholars have pointed out its similarities to traditional oral narratives, including theatrical performances such as the *komedya* and *sarsuwela*, which were popular among the peasantry in the past. Most commentators, recognizing AlDub's huge fan base, have expressed positive views about this phenomenon, claiming it contains valuable lessons that reinforce traditional elements of Filipino culture such as respect for elders. Yet others, expressing mainly middle-class prejudices, criticize it as shallow, exploitive, and humiliating.

Surprisingly, no one seems to have linked this phenomenon to an equally puzzling aspect of Philippine life—the well-known connection between politics and entertainment. The AlDub case poses interesting questions regarding political and social capital. Yet both politics and social capital draw on collective ties that link individuals to their respective leaders/idols. What earlier explanations lack is a solid ethnographic account of the role *Eat Bulaga* plays in everyday life, in this case, how the material context of production is related to the social context of consumption. Anthropology is an important source for such an ethnographic approach.

The Silly and the Profound

One of the most important turns in recent anthropology is its analysis of media and the construction of a lived world. Contemporary life is not only suffused with media but reproduces itself through media images and practices. We not only live with media but also in media and through media. Watching TV, sending text messages, and singing *videoke* are not only common forms of entertainment but also essential aspects of self-representation and self-construction. Employing the feminist insight that the personal is political links these practices of individual entertainment to the social world of politics.

Anthropology has also turned its attention to less exotic and closer-to-home realities often overlooked by mainstream disciplines. These realities concern quotidian activities such as watching TV, hanging out in malls, and engaging in ordinary practices of consumption. None of these are generally seen as involving deep and significant meanings but are nevertheless essential for the construction and reproduction of the self. Many observers see these trivialities of everyday life as evidence of the superficiality of modernity and modernity's preference for the merely popular as against earlier classical aesthetic standards. They also see in them the triumph of the secular or profane over the sacred. Émile Durkheim, a pioneer of anthropology, pointed out that the profane and the sacred are two aspects of a common reality. This insight may provide the key to better understand the relationship and importance of silly programs, such as *Eat Bulaga*, to the more profound elements of contemporary life, such as politics and the economy. These superficial but profound aspects are linked by media using the diversions of entertainment.

Many foreigners are disconcerted by the insistence of Filipinos to mix hilarity with seriousness. Even the most sober Filipino personalities are required to engage in behavior such as singing and dancing for the amusement of an audience. Serious talk shows and even academic conferences invariably include lighter moments when people share jokes and indulge in actions that are at best silly or even vulgar. Sobriety and lewdness are often two sides of the same coin. Joking behavior has been an important element of anthropological study in societies with rigid status hierarchies. Rituals of reversal oblige the highborn to momentarily play the fool as a form of self-deprecation. Through these displays of self-abnegation, social hierarchies are reinforced and legitimated. Victor Turner (1969) uses the term “communitas” to describe these momentary reversals as expressions of a common humanity. Self and other exchange places to indicate their ontological equivalence. Alterity is a reciprocal and necessary aspect of the self.

Patronage and Fandom

Observers of Philippine life are often struck by the importance of media stars in politics. It seems that a sure way of achieving political success is to have myriads of fans willing to vote one into office simply for being well known.

Hence, media stardom and political success reinforce one another. Sen. Tito Sotto, a founding member of *Eat Bulaga*, garnered the third largest number of votes among senatorial candidates in the May 2016 elections, undoubtedly helped by the success of AlDub. Manny Pacquiao, the nation's boxing icon and current congressman, also won a seat in the Senate in the 2016 polls. What they both share is a wide and loyal fan base. Since Senator Sotto and Congressman Pacquiao are politicians (as well as media personalities), their bases of support span both fandom and politics.

The links between patronage and political support are a long-standing feature of Philippine society. Patronage is based on an exchange of services and material support—the politician promises resources in exchange for the vote. Fandom is a much more recent feature of Philippine culture and can be traced to the American influence early last century when the new colonizers introduced new communication media, in particular shellac recordings and later radio broadcasts. One of the earliest recording artists that gained wide popularity was Maria Carpena, initially through shellac recordings (1910) and later through radio broadcasts. This led to the growing influence of popular singers and film stars, resulting in the current obsession with media personalities. But while political support and fandom are closely related, their final expressions are not identical—the former is based on material exchanges while the latter depend on feelings of adulation, which may or may not result in material exchanges. But the increasing mediatization of contemporary life makes this distinction less operative. Hence popularity, however achieved, may result in voting support. For this reason Senator Sotto and Congressman Pacquiao have translated their popularity into political support (R. Pertierra 2016).

The other way to political success is to benefit from the feelings of compassion following the death of a prominent personality. Current Pres. Benigno Simeon “Noynoy” Aquino III and Sen. Grace Poe, a leading candidate for president in 2016, largely owe their political success to the feelings of compassion, following the death of former president Corazon “Cory” Aquino, President Aquino's mother, as well as the sudden death of popular movie actor Fernando Poe Jr., Grace Poe's father. These feelings draw on the notion of *communitas*.

These two approaches share similar structural sources of support, e.g., fandom and shared grief. They involve members generally unknown to one

another but drawn together in a common sense of belonging that is focused on a prominent personality or event. When combined, they form a sure path to political success. As Benedict Anderson (1991) has pointed out, this sense of individualized collectivity is the rationale and basis for imagining the nation. The effectiveness of social media in generating such imaginaries is now a common event (R. Pertierra 2012). Given the apparent stability of Philippine politics, the effects of social media are too early to predict (Mirandilla 2011). More likely, the new media is increasingly shaping what is defined as political, hitherto controlled by the elite. YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, while starting as personal exchanges, often morph into public discussions. The new media operates in an informational environment that encourages the sharing of messages. Given the network nature of Philippine culture and the vicarious pleasure of *schadenfreude*, people in authority must now tread carefully in not exposing their foibles.

Ethnography of *Eat Bulaga*

Anna Cristina Pertierra (2014), an anthropologist, has done ethnographic research on *Eat Bulaga*. The frequent response by colleagues and others dismissive of the significance of popular TV programs as a serious object of anthropological research was to point out the silly and exploitative nature of *Eat Bulaga*. She responded by saying that it was precisely the program's silliness and exploitative nature that attracted her interest. Since this program is among the most popular and long-lasting noontime entertainment shows, it must express fundamental interests and values among its viewers. (Other anthropologists such as Abu-Lughod [2004] had earlier argued about the importance of popular culture in generating a national imaginary.) *Eat Bulaga* is not only an iconic example of popular culture but it also plays a quotidian role in representing and experiencing everyday Filipino life. A cursory peek into the average household quickly reveals people watching, perhaps not always intently, their favorite telenovela. *Eat Bulaga* is part and parcel of people's everyday experience both televisually and sensorially.

Given its silly and superficial appearance, how does *Eat Bulaga* achieve this important cultural role? It does so in a number of ways.

[T]he core of the program is a trio of comedians, Tito, Vic and Joey. Their importance and influence in Philippine life exceeds the merely

televisual. They . . . are adored, revered, they sell everything from groceries to real estate, they are seen as realisers of miracles through charities and prizes, they exert political influence, they can make or break television networks and other media companies. (A. Pertierra 2014, 23)

The quote above indicates that the power of media stars is not purely televisual but is also located in practical structures of patronage and economic distribution, not unlike politicians. In fact, the equivalence between the two is striking. Both combine material and symbolic exchanges assuring their participants with a regular source of rewards and alliances.

The makers and the viewers of this show all understand that the value of *Eat Bulaga* comes from an engagement with the audience and a sense of close connection between what is happening onscreen and what is happening in the viewer's home. . . . Studio audience members work hard to play their role in creating the energy and atmosphere of the show during taping, and production staff work hard to motivate the audience members in such behavior. (ibid.)

What appears to be spontaneous behavior in fact is the result of rigorous and disciplined practice on behalf of production staff and their consenting audience. Contrary to common opinion, media stars are products of deliberate and exhaustive practices. Their seeming spontaneity and happenstance hide the hard work that is necessary for their long-lived success. Although Anna Pertierra conducted her fieldwork before the AIDub phenomenon, her work reveals the dynamic and deliberate efforts of program personnel, including the audience in and outside the studio to generate feelings of joy, happiness, and fulfillment. It reveals the collaborative and consensual nature of much popular entertainment, including its material rewards. All of them engage in emotional labor to produce 2.5 hours of seemingly unscripted fun and silliness.

One segment of the show—its most popular . . . represents the capacity of *Eat Bulaga* to insert itself into the everyday lives of viewers. . . . The . . . Juan for All/All For Juan selects a different neighbourhood every day from which the show broadcasts live . . . Local residents,

barangay captains, tanods, competition entrants, all voluntarily labor for such an event to happen and even those who are not loyal viewers of the show become affected by the presence of *Eat Bulaga*. (ibid.)

It is within this segment of *Eat Bulaga* involving an external studio audience—literally, on the streets, a *kalyeserye* (a soap opera parody)—that has spontaneously and unexpectedly led to the online exchange between hitherto undiscovered actors that resulted in the AIDub media phenomenon. AIDub is an instance of serendipity inserting itself into the everyday.

AIDub as Instant Myth Making

On Monday, 26 October 2015, a world record of 41 million tweets were sent with the hashtag #AIDubEBTamangPanahon, referring to a live charity concert being held to celebrate the face-to-face meeting of a young couple who had “fallen in love” while appearing onscreen during the television show. The story behind the love match popularly known as AIDub (a combination of the young man's first name, Alden, and his female admirer's character, Yaya Dub) is now almost legendary.

Until July 2015, Alden Richards was a Filipino actor and television host with a moderate following, a recent addition to the large and rotating ensemble of presenters on *Eat Bulaga*. Since July 2015, however, they were joined by a woman, Maine Mendoza, whose self-produced videos using the mobile application Dubsplash had gained her a sudden and massive social media following. A few months before being recruited to *Eat Bulaga*, Mendoza had posted a video compilation to her Facebook account in which she mimed to audio samples of a famous Philippine actress. Within a day the video had been viewed more than one million times, and the attention initially generated by viral videos on Mendoza's social media accounts quickly spread to national press, radio, and television coverage. *Eat Bulaga* cast Mendoza to take part in an improvised segment that was a soap opera parody; she played Yaya Dub, a young and innocent companion (half caretaker, half housemaid) to a demanding older woman, played by male comedian Wally Bayola in drag. Yaya Dub in an aside expressed an interest in Alden, and this serendipitously was the origin of AIDub (A. Pertierra 2016).

An aspect of AIDub is its seemingly spontaneous and unpredictable success, exceeding any rational basis. An almost accidental discovery of a

potential relationship between two members of the kalyeserye cast suddenly opened a momentous opportunity. This serendipitous success suggests an almost magical and miraculous origin akin to forms of religious conversion or epiphany. But a more prosaic explanation lies in the nature of contemporary life with its unpredictabilities, assisted by the new communications technology. We live in a world of increasing unpredictability. YouTube regularly features stories marked by unexpected and spectacular attention due to the rapid proliferation of information, including trivia. The spectacle is now characterized by trivial and banal instances of everyday life transformed into events of media. In the past mythical events developed over a very long period of gestation, causing their details to be forgotten and leaving only the myth. But today the new media can transform the quotidian into the mythical almost instantly. Through mere iteration the trivial and banal are transformed into the hyperreal, a higher level of meaning. The trivial becomes viral in a form of repetitive signification encountered in ritual and prayer.

As a wit has pointed out, media stars and politicians are famous for being famous. This fame consists of images merging into other images (with their corresponding social relations and material practices) and creating the simulacrum. The end of this fame, including AlDub, is its replacement, unpredictable but inevitable, by other trivia. However, *Eat Bulaga*, its original source, relies on more solid material and economic structures for its longevity. For now, AlDub's cultural repercussions remain elusive and open to abuse and manipulation by powerful forces, under the guise of democracy and the popular will.

Popular Culture and Material Practices

According to Anna Pertierra (ibid.), “one can’t theorize Philippine modernity or politics without including a deep analysis of television and entertainment industries. Yet unlike religion or agriculture or even politics—all important issues—most Philippine specialists can’t bring themselves to take popular culture seriously as if its deliberate lightness somehow prevents serious analysis.”

This lack of interest in the analysis of popular culture, at least by most anthropologists, shows that scholarship itself is a victim of unacknowledged cultural prejudices. There are scholars who take popular culture more seriously (e.g., cultural studies), but their work often lacks the theoretical

rigor of disciplines such as anthropology with its bases in ethnographic detail. Popular culture requires more than interpretative approaches for its significance to be fully understood—performance should be seen both as material production and cultural consumption. Popular culture must be located outside itself to identify its sources of power and to reveal its constituting practices. In other words, popular culture must be seen as a component of a broader sociological reality. Otherwise, popular culture is seen only as a series of shallow representations. Instead, we should view popular culture as a field of practices using images to impose a view of the world, including a position within this world, with the partial consent of its participants. Culture is not only a domain of signification but also a field of signified practices. Revealing these practices will expose the sources for their powers of identification. The central role of media in merging entertainment with politics is a feature of late capitalism. Do participants in *Eat Bulaga* consent to their humiliation, or do they see their actions as expressions of solidarity albeit momentarily? What appears as exploitive from a bourgeois perspective may express authentic representation by members of the exploited class. In this way popular culture may be an expression of the will of an otherwise unrepresented class.

Why are there deep ties connecting political, religious, and economic structures with seemingly superficial and silly entertainment? A possible explanation may lie in the notion of *communitas*, mentioned earlier. If so, then *Eat Bulaga* is able to generate feelings of *communitas* among its audience and viewers. How is this achieved? Guy Debord (1994) views modern society as a series of spectacles or simulacra passing themselves as real. The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images. This capacity to generate social relations using images illustrates the power of media and its underlying technology. In this sense *Eat Bulaga* is as much a creation of social relations using televisual means combined with material distribution, as it is entertainment. In other words *Eat Bulaga* is a form of politics, using entertainment as its rationale. Here the spectacle and the simulacrum merge, creating the real and hyperreal. The simulacrum of *communitas* in *Eat Bulaga* is politically and economically real. It generates loyalties and redistributes goods. It is also a basis for a national imaginary, hence the justification of AlDub as a nation, whose citizens take seriously any aspersions on their loyalties.

The Anthropology of Popular Culture

This essay was initially meant to stimulate discussion of the AlDub phenomenon among anthropologists. The discipline has tended to neglect the rise of popular culture as a field of serious inquiry, leaving its investigation to scholars in communication and cultural studies. Part of this neglect among anthropologists lies in the discipline's obsession with deep cultural meanings not often encountered in popular entertainment. Anthropologists often see popular culture as a superficial expression of more significant social forces underlying class prejudices, political interests, and economic motives. These social forces have been the topics that anthropologists have mostly investigated. In this sense popular culture is a secondary phenomenon not meriting serious academic interest.

In the old understanding of culture as an authentic expression of collective orientations and norms, popular culture is seen, at best, as a distorted representation of collective values, or at worst as reinforcing the forces of social domination through mechanisms of obfuscation. For this reason, most anthropologists see popular culture as an expression of hegemonic factors legitimating domination. But some anthropologists, mainly in Latin America such as Néstor García Canclini (1995), have a more positive view of popular culture, seeing it as a site of resistance and innovation.

Admittedly, an alternative notion of culture more locally embedded had received some attention by previous anthropologists. Folklore and other expressions of local culture interested early anthropologists who saw it as an authentic expression of cultural norms. Ironically, even these elements of local culture have been greatly disseminated by electronic media. The sarsuwela, kundiman, and other genres profited from the introduction of film, radio, and television. Indie films and OPM (original Pilipino music) are current manifestations of these technologically mediated cultural forms. Even movements such as Balagtasismo and Pantayong Pananaw, seen as expressing local/national culture, are products of modern communication. Finally, I should mention attempts by elements of the Left to encourage cultural forms that genuinely express the interests of the *masa* (the masses; e.g., *usapang babae* [women talk] and political theater are prime examples).

For similar reasons, media and communication have not received much attention from anthropologists accustomed to working in small-scale local societies. But anthropologists now have to admit that modernity has penetrated every aspect of contemporary society, including locality.

The local now mostly exists as an aspect of the global. While all societies communicate, only under modernity has it been possible to organize society through communication (Bauman 2005). Mass media and lately the mobile phone are prime instances of communicatively generated social formations. Communicating at a distance with absent others has now become a major feature of contemporary life (R. Pertierra 2010). This interest of communicating at a distance is particularly appealing to overseas Filipinos. *Balikbayan* (overseas migrant returnees) are given special privileges whenever they visit the studio to watch *Eat Bulaga*: they are accorded special seating arrangements as part of the studio audience. They become part of the reality that had enthralled them while viewing the show abroad.

Anthropologists have to address this technologically mediated condition even as it challenges traditional notions of culture as collective and exemplary. Technologically mediated relationships have now replaced earlier notions of corporeal communication, and cultural exchanges involving an absent presence are now quotidian. Overseas-based anthropologists have now adjusted their research interests appropriately but, unfortunately, this trend has not attracted much attention among local Filipino anthropologists. Naturally, there are exceptions; among them is the work of Maria Mangahas (2014) on the popularity of “scandal” videos. It is for this reason that I decided to examine the AlDub phenomenon using the ethnographic work of Anna Pertierra on *Eat Bulaga*. Research on popular culture and social media can profit enormously from a detailed ethnography of the set of practices that underlie their production. However, ethnography is often tedious and time consuming, practices that contemporary scholarly institutions are often loath to encourage, preferring instead the rapid production of interpretative approaches.

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