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## Eduardo Masferré and the Philippine Cordillera

*Ma. Luisa B. Aguilar-Cariño*



As the European empires elaborated their designs for lengthening their shadows across the globe and as America began to embark on similar ventures, technological progress yielded new ways (such as the photographic apparatus, its daguerreotypes and other products) for collapsing these faraway worlds into "compact, intellectually conquerable space[s]" (Roces 1983, 120). These could be brought back, for leisurely perusal and investigation, from the new frontiers being explored abroad. The photograph became a portable means to and proof of knowledge of the colonized subject, a flat package of strangeness and exoticism transported to an acquisitive and inquisitive west for unabashed scrutiny.

In an essay on the nature of documentation in nineteenth-century photographs of Filipinos taken by Westerners, Marian Pastor Roces tells us that the oldest extant picture of a native Filipino was made in the 1860s (Roces 1983, 119). The subject was a girl from the northern Tingguian tribe. As in other photographs from this time, the girl is held by the camera in a stiff, formal pose; she holds both arms close to her torso, though the slightly forward placement of left arm and leg and the barely perceptible tilt of head and shoulder suggest the photographer's attempts at and directions for a studied pose. Following the photographic conventions of the day, the nineteenth-century photographic portrait was posed against a background largely devoid of any decorative or contextualizing objects, and of any special or suggestive lighting technique.

The goal of the photographic enterprise can be seen within the larger aims of empire, and the flat surfaces of pictures worked mainly to catalogue images according to their differentiating features, "facial/body geography, . . . costume, posture, habitat, etc. (Roces 1983, 120)" So it is enough that the Tingguian girl would be (as she was) beheld for the way her image departed from European feminine

representations at the time: from her hair, artlessly swept back and held in place by what appear to be a coil of beads and some crude tasseled ornament, to her dark coloring, slanted eyes, her minimal shift made of what must have been some coarse woven fabric, and her general air of passivity or wistful resignation.

It is this perspective that is one of the most significant for the continuing interrogation of Philippine history and culture, in particular for the mapping and reexcavation of areas where the signs of our visibility as a people might have once surfaced and disappeared and/or over which they might have been dispersed. It is important to remember the suspicion, still occasionally displayed today, especially in more interior regions of the archipelago, with which the native Filipino regards the camera. It was believed that the mysterious instrument was capable of absorbing the soul, in almost the same way the French novelist Honore Balzac once described the taking of a picture as a removal of "spectral layers" from the body.

The phrase "to take a picture" is symbolically apt, when we consider how the early photographs used in books that a majority of the indios were unable to read (having been denied access to higher education from fear that colonial power would weaken if the colonized subject were "taught to think") inadvertently reveal the deeper agenda of conquest within their frames. Pictures focusing on exotica and minutiae are illustrative of this curious and paradoxical loss of the image's power to solidly occupy photographic space despite its assemblage as a physical document. Examples are pictures of tribal people, rituals, plants, costumes, animals, etc.—the stranger and more bizarre to the westerner, the better—posed against flat backgrounds, wrenched from any network of social and cultural signification, and always painted over with the inexplicable aura of death or melancholia. One photograph, described by Roces in her essay, is of a matron whose fan is suspended by a chain around her waist. The caption, amazing in its documentary coolness, reads "*antes y despues de los terremotos de 1880*" (before and after the 1880 earthquake") (Roces 1983, 117). Pictures taken from the Philippine-American war show dead Filipinos in ditches, with captions like "Work of the Kansas Boys," "Trench Showing Work of the Washington Regiment," or "An effectual method for collecting rent." Thus stripped, the photographs work as "types" in the westerner's growing new taxonomy, and are accompanied by captions penned along their borders in flowing calligraphy: "Tingguian man," "Cattle used as pack animals and for riding, Luzon, Philippine Islands," "Native dog," "Two friends hand

in hand;" "High born Filipina; upper garment of costly *piña*," and so forth. Roces sees these images as

posthumous utterances to which we might sincerely respond with mourning. What do our ancestors have to say about themselves? That they were short (as the big white man/small *aeta* pictures vouch); they were fragile instead of robust; monkey-ish in G-string and frizzy hair or at best, *gauche* in the reinterpretations of European costume. . . ; docile instead of proud. The Filipino was an anonymous entity rather than a memorable individual. And masses of these unknowns were shown to be quite given to small pleasures like cockfighting, petty businesses like water-carrying, petty privileges like acting European, marginal jobs like taking care of white babies. (Roces 1983, 117)

Like Panofsky's "window," these early photographs open out into spaces that never yield a completely geometric/objective framing, as their contents come into a field of tension and psychological interpretation where always "there is a fundamental discrepancy between 'reality' and its construction" (Panofsky 1991, 31). In many respects, they are less about the Philippines than about the people who took them. They were meant to support the new knowledge being assembled in journals, travel accounts, and history books about the new colonies in the east, bear witness to the photographers' daring forays into wild and untamed territory and their triumphant return to civilization with the hard-won proofs of conquest.

Photographic images of the early Filipino like those published in an 1898 book by Dean C. Worcester (who played a key role in the American insular government in the Philippines), must have so intrigued the West that when a world's fair was held in St. Louis, Missouri in 1904 (at the beginning of American colonial rule in the Philippines), it was determined that a "Philippine Reservation" would be set up on forty-seven acres of fairground. Fair organizers wished to display a "congress of races," exhibiting particularly the barbarous and semi-barbarous peoples of the world, as nearly as possible in their ordinary and native environments."

Live exhibits would show a progression from savagery to civilization, ending in the American expansionist project abroad as embodied in the exhibit of clothed, native Filipinos (including Igorots<sup>1</sup> from the Cordillera and more than a hundred Bontoc "headhunters") reciting American nursery rhymes or singing American patriotic songs. Over a thousand native Filipinos from different Philippine tribes were

"imported" for the fair, and replicas of native houses and implements were painstakingly built so Americans visiting the fair could see them do traditional tasks. Needless to say, more pictures were taken of the Filipinos on exhibit and these made their way as souvenirs into hundreds of American homes.

A sensational highlight of the exhibit was the "Igorot dog feast," playing out the actual slaughter, roasting and consumption of a dog. Patricia Okubo Afaible recounts in a talk delivered last summer and meant to provide background to the Masferré exhibit at the Smithsonian Institute, how the city of St. Louis supplied some twenty dogs a month from the local pound, so the Igorots could "perform" this titillating spectacle several times a week, even though dog-eating occurs only rarely in traditional highland culture—chickens, pigs, cows and water buffalos being the preferred ritual animals and food sources (Afaible 1992, 21–22). The result was the creation of another still-powerful stereotype of the Igorot, to be placed alongside those that classify them as headhunters, savages and freaks.

It is against the compressions and fabulations in this background (long passed off as history), that we might reflect on the work of Eduardo Masferré.

### **On the Cusp of Two Worlds**

Eduardo Masferré of Bontoc and Sagada in the mountain province, northern Philippines, is a Filipino mestizo. His father Jaime was a Spanish soldier who had chosen to remain in the Cordillera after Spain ceded the Philippine colony to the United States in 1898. Before he quit the army in 1895, Jaime was a lieutenant in charge of the small Kankana-ey village of Sagada, where he and two other Spanish soldiers started a successful coffee and citrus plantation. Jaime married the Kankana-ey girl Cunyap (later Christianized to Mercedes Pins) in 1905, and the couple had four girls and four boys. Eduardo was the second son, born 18 April 1909. He and his brother Jaime Jr. were taken to Spain where they lived from 1914 to 1921 (and where the latter died of tuberculosis). The elder Jaime brought Eduardo back to Sagada in 1921, and, up to 1926 when he transferred to Baguio City for the rest of his high school education, Eduardo attended the mission school on whose grounds the family lived at this time. Jaime Masferré had been one of the first to welcome the Americans to Sagada. The Episcopalian missionary John Staunton arrived there with

his wife in 1904 to establish the Episcopal Mission of Saint Mary the Virgin. Soon after, Jaime Masferré converted from Catholicism and helped in the mission school (Jones 1984, 6).

With American efforts to set up local government structures in the country, traders, teachers and missionaries began coming into the rugged Cordillera—heretofore a territory that the Spaniards had been largely unable to penetrate or subdue in their 300-year rule, because of fierce resistance put up by the Igorots, especially in the more interior regions. With the colonial policy of “educating the natives,” what was previously a swampland called “Kafagway” became the first—and thus far only—city in the Cordillera: Baguio. From the ranks of the Igorots, a “mountain militia” was formed to facilitate colonization (Fry 1983, 86). Centuries-old lifeways began to change drastically with the opening of Kennon road and the American-controlled gold mines, the introduction of Christianity, and of money into what was previously a subsistence economy.

All of a sudden the Igorots had to contend with the difficulties of change, and they faced the dilemma of whether to integrate or to retreat further into the mountains to preserve tradition. These new problems were compounded by the increasingly distorted images of themselves and their way of life, many of these foisted upon them from without, and circulating among lowland cultures who did not know any better either. It was around this time that *National Geographic* published in 1911, 1912, and 1913 a series of articles with pictures by then Secretary of the Interior of the Philippines Dean C. Worcester, “about sports introduced to replace headhunting . . . and give the American public an impression of the ‘wild man at home’” (Jones 1988, 7).

Worcester’s 1911 *National Geographic* pictures were the first ones of the Igorots that Masferré saw, as a boy of fifteen. Fr. Leonard Wolcott, an American priest, was taking pictures of the mission and had a darkroom. Masferré helped him and learned about the developing process, but it was not until 1931 when he was back at St. Mary’s as an elementary school teacher that he returned to the hobby that was to preoccupy him over the rest of his life. Fr. Clifford Nobes, another mission priest, was also taking pictures. The two shared a darkroom with largely improvised equipment (Masferré made a daylight enlarger based on descriptions from mail-order catalogs) and chatted a little about the composition of a good photograph. He began to sell prints to visiting foreigners, and his pictures began to appear “here and there, with or without attribution” in the lowlands (Reyes 1993, 31).

Manila-based portrait photographer Butch Baluyot was responsible for mounting the first exhibition of Masferré's works in Manila, in the early seventies. This was followed by another smaller show in 1982, bringing Masferré to the attention of more and more people in local and foreign art circles. A subsequent exhibit was held at the Cultural Center of the Philippines, and Masferré was hailed as the "Filipino Edward Curtis" for his "elegiac" portraits and landscapes of the Cordillera. Later, in the turbulent years following the declaration of Martial Law and in the wake of heated controversies surrounding the surrender and loss of ancestral lands to government and government-supported logging and mining corporations, young Cordillera activists appropriated Masferré's pictures and read in them "the message of the beleaguered but militant native against the government that would seek to destroy . . . land and community" (Afable 1992, 33).

Masferré's photographs have also been exhibited in France, Copenhagen, Tokyo, California and New York on different occasions since 1981. In 1991, an Asian Pacific artists' organization in Chicago printed a Masferré photograph on a postcard to publicize an exhibit titled "*Bodong*."<sup>2</sup> The exhibit, which was interested in bringing together artists and members of Asian and American communities, also carried eight of his pictures. From 1 May to 7 September 1992, Masferré's most important exhibit thus far was held at the Smithsonian Institution's Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C., bringing his photographic work to more audiences and to the borders of exciting areas for cross-cultural, cross-disciplinary investigations and dialogues.

In the book edited by De Villa, Garcia-Farr and Montgomery-Jones, Masferré's works appear for the first time between covers. Montgomery-Jones' Masferré appears to us as an individual caught between two cultures by virtue of his parentage. The descriptions are based on her more than twenty-five hours of interviews with Masferré in 1988. But the life and work of the now eighty-three-year-old "quiet and dignified gentleman" are languaged in terms that never quite manage to bring the reader to a level where a more intimate encounter with the denser, emotional undercurrents and underpinnings that must have accompanied this photographic project—especially as it is so remarkable for its consistency and the span of years over which it was undertaken—becomes possible.

Without meaning to do violence to areas of personally cherished value and memory, it seems necessary, for instance, to point out how certain passages in the introduction apparently take pains to align

Masferré more within the dominant culture and traditions his father stood for, than with anything else. For instance, Masferré's mother is described thus: "Her ethnic name was Cunyap, *her Christian name, which she preferred, was Mercedes Pins*" (underscoring supplied) (Montgomery-Jones 1988, 6). Further on, another passage reads, "The Masferrés lived at the mission, not in the Kankana-ey village. Their lives, and the lives of most of their close relatives in Sagada, were centered on the mission. Mercedes Masferré wore traditional dress—except when she was sitting for a family portrait—but she and her children did not attend the Kankana-ey rituals" (Montgomery-Jones 1988, 7). On the same pages there are pictures of Eduardo and his brother Jaime dressed in sailor suits and laced-up leather boots, flanking the elder Jaime in waistcoat and cravat (1914). Another picture has Eduardo and his father in the garden, looking somewhere afar (1912). Jaime rests one hand paternally on the boy's shoulder, and he in turn claims his father's knee with his small palm. Mercedes, looking straight out at the camera and with her hair sleeked into a prim *chignon*, hovers in the background in her gauzy *pañuelo* and long skirt. What is striking is that neither Eduardo, his bother, nor his mother in these pictures bear any physical resemblance to the subjects of his photographs. Without the accompanying text, they could have passed for lowlanders or city folk—it would be hard to tell that they were Igorot.

Masferré explains to Montgomery-Jones that "we had not much contact with tribal traditions. You see, what we were taught in the mission school gave the idea that all of those things were wrong" (Montgomery-Jones 1988, 7). In careful wording, we are told too that

Eduardo's parents, however, conveyed to him an appreciation of the Kankana-ey people. His father spoke about their honesty and industriousness, his mother about their wisdom and common sense. They advised him to decide for himself whether or not to follow the old beliefs and way of life. Though Eduardo . . . never chose to live in the traditional way, he saw value in the beliefs that were often dismissed by outsiders as pagan superstitions. He realized that these beliefs motivated people and maintained community mores (Montgomery-Jones 1988, 7).

### The Doubled Igorot

When he decided to take photographs of the Cordillera people and of their traditional ways of life, Masferré said it was because he could feel that these would soon disappear and succumb to change and



modernity. With what seems a genuine gratefulness, Masferré talks about how his photographic ventures were instrumental in bringing him for the first time to the Igorot rituals he and his family had, by choice or otherwise, studiously avoided while he was growing up (Montgomery-Jones 1988, 8). Masferré says that he never primarily intended to take the photographs for their ethnographic value. However, he does say elsewhere that he saw his work as "a way to document the life here as it is, because it is a different life from life elsewhere. . . . I could see there would be a time when the life would disappear" (Montgomery-Jones 1988, 7). While acknowledging the inevitable eradication of traditional lifeways, part of him seems to have resisted the idea. Thus, when in 1949 he visited a Kalinga village and the villagers asked him to show them how to replace their flimsy thatched roofs with sheets of more durable galvanized iron, he refused because this "would have ruined the pictures" (Montgomery-Jones 1988, 7).

This last remark is a curious one, when we consider how Masferré says that he only wants to be remembered by the Igorots as *someone just passing through*, whose presence and activity were barely perceptible, as a hand passed lightly over the surface of their lives leaves almost no legible mark or trace—but also of whom they could hopefully later say, "*It is good he was here.*" This idea is especially provocative and urges a closer examination of the photographs depicting Masferré's subjects as though fiercely and completely absorbed in or by the sheer physicality of their surroundings: for example, the shot of three women harvesting rice, almost indistinguishable amid the rice stalks; a man tightening with his teeth the knot around a sheaf of grain; glossy surfaces of mud and water outlining as though in relief voluptuous forms dancing in a circle or bent over in the field. And when we compare these with other frames within which, for example, two or three faces are caught in the split second that they turn away from the ritual activity at hand, or stare back at the photographer instead of at the camera which everyone else is busily inspecting, it becomes apparent that the framer's presence, no matter the careful or conscious attempts to edit it out of the pictures, will always register on their edges.

Certain questions seem to bear asking in the light of this background, when we view the work and the significance which has been attached to it in relation to the larger project of examining Philippine indigenous cultures towards the articulation of a national identity. Masferré's photographs have been described as

vintage works [which] link . . . the past and the present: a link with the past when photographers concocted their own emulsions which they spread over glass, and therefore had to be precise as chemists using weighing scales for their liquids, calibrating everything; a link with the present as Philippine photography today has matured to a point where the writing of its history is becoming a felt need (Roces 1983, 132).

Further, the photographs are viewed as "honest and faithful documents of a minority culture that has for ages occupied the fringes of the national consciousness. At the same time, they are presented as art." (Tolentino 1989, 2)

Viewing the photographs, it becomes clearer and clearer how it is impossible to see Masferré as merely the dispassionate recorder or technician, not even simply as the benign shadow that passes across the landscape without in some way altering its shape and figuration. Accounts of Masferré's work tend to highlight his status as a "self-taught" artist, although it is clear that having himself sat for portraits of the kind that were kept and valued in the same way as relics, as part of the family narrative, his keen understanding of the uses of the *recuerdo* could be characterized as intuitive if not for the fact that it is a product of his participation in a reading and writing (a material) culture—one that is also newly concerned with the arrangement, preservation and deployment of images, among other cultural practices.

Among the Cordillera tribes themselves, there was hardly any system of writing or recorded language although there is a complex epic tradition relying heavily on memory tropes and a thorough orientation based on one's placement in the (orally reconstructed) genealogical chart and kin group. Convincing the Igorots to let him take their photographs was no mean feat, for they regarded the camera as an object to be feared, something that had the magical power of duplicating their images and *taking away* an imprint of their souls. Masferré managed this by presenting the photograph to the natives as their means of living on into future generations, by pointing out, as Delfin Tolentino puts it,

the perishability of the subject. The camera is a magic net that seeks to capture the elusive moment, and the photograph may be seen as the triumph of man over the impermanence that tyrannizes him. Photographs, like all other mementos, are attempts to freeze the image or the experience that becomes history in seconds, thus they provide the illusion that what is gone is still in the present tense (Tolentino 1989, 2).

The essence of things, the "reality of reality" (Zwingle 1989, 532) which the photograph is perceived to capture, is an idea which floats behind current readings of Masferré's work. If his pictures are seen as "honest and faithful documents of a minority culture," it becomes useful not only to inquire into the kinds of truth in them, but also into who is "speaking" through them, and what the types of (re)presentation realized are. There is on the one hand the *physical* landscape and history of the *Gran Cordillera Central*, with its harsh climatic conditions, rough terrain, unique people and conflicts attendant to their encounters with other cultures and ways of life. There is on the other hand the *symbolic* landscape, constituted by ritual, myth, folklore, language, social codes and practices, and by other representations of it. If the camera likewise is seen as a means for capturing the elusive moment, for producing a souvenir, what are we to make of the image's resulting dual nature (here, the photographs are held forth both as history/document, and as frames proposing that the fleeting moment is still somehow part of the present)?

Norman Bryson notes that to disregard the material conditions surrounding the image's production results in an overly simplified analysis. Further, he proposes that the artist's gaze and the subsequent moment of cognition never completely embrace the landscape of outer reality, but instead disclose a construct that merely derives from it.

As the [artist] takes up his position before the canvas and begins his work, there is an encounter between this complex of practical knowledge and the new situation; under the pressure of the novel demands of the encounter, the complex itself is modified, and its tradition extended (Bryson 1983, 16).

The reading of Masferré proposed here is one that sees him simultaneously as medium and agent for an "insider's" approach to the Cordillera, and for disclosing the way the project of "writing" the history of colonized peoples (begun under the Western tradition of collective "portraiture" and cataloguing of colonized peoples [see Memmi 1991, 79-89]) unconsciously *continues* through him. Masferré's pictures propose to relate narratives of traditional life from a largely vanished world he can claim membership in. However, at the same time, they demonstrate the complex ways in which personal, cultural, political and ideological assumptions of the world are projected outward, the ways in which visual spaces (in this case) and the people

and objects that fill them are appropriated—depending on the beholder's position in relation to these, and to their and his own conscious and unconscious positioning in historical time and space. Masferré's images of the Igorot yield a double reading, and he himself is a doubled subject attempting to retrieve a sense of wholeness with the culture of his mother's people, a culture that, in a manner of speaking, he never really penetrated bodily until he began taking photographs.

Other signs of the doubledness with which both Masferré and the subjects of his photographs have wittingly or unwittingly allowed their visages to be depicted, are visible in the collection. For instance, it becomes possible to read its little signs as parts of a running (and almost imperceptible) theme: the way two different worlds are laid, just like photographs (which they also are), side by side (or face to face), the way their edges begin to disappear in a misty fadeout, the way—almost unobtrusively—the material symbols from one world begin to appear in the framed, other world. So it is that, after the gaze has become accustomed to the movement and tempo articulated within the frames, it begins to trace the delineations of these other forms which work, no longer just as "reassuring bits of *gaucherie*"<sup>3</sup> for colonial viewers, but as inventive arrangements or reappropriations: the stubby cigars which are matter-of-factly smoked in pipes; the native axe dangling from an improvised chain-link belt slung around a man's waist; leather belts typically used by modern city-dwellers to hold up their trousers, cinching the bare waist above the top of the g-string or loincloth. In one photograph, a small, plain metal barette peeks out from underneath the coils of beads on the young Buscalan woman's head. In another, a key suspended on a key ring is used as a pendant (it was probably a found object, for the houses did not have locks and it was not yet common practice to keep valuables under lock and key) by the Kalinga woman pounding rice on the left. In another photograph, a group of Sagada men pour *tapuy* (rice wine) from the ancient jar where it was left to sweeten and ferment, into flat enamelware typically bought in the lowlands. Interesting too is the photograph taken by Maria Teresa Garcia Farr of a smiling Masferré himself, seated in a woven *rattan* chair, arms folded and resting partly on his lap; behind him is one of the painted backdrops he presumably used for posed shots in his home studio, of some vaguely European scene with a colonnade, dense foliage, and a splashing fountain. He is dressed in an outfit such as a clerk, civil servant, or schoolteacher would wear—a simple white, short-sleeved

*polo* (shirt) and a pair of light trousers. But (perhaps because of his bandaged—injured? arthritic?—left ankle) the shot captures him in a pose (uncropped) that the urbane and “citified” Filipino, Igorot or not, would be horrified at: the feet are bare, clad not in socks and shoes but in the lowly *tsinelas* (rubber thong slippers), and showing up starkly against the ornate pattern of the carpet.

Returning to another photograph, the attempt to place the camera in the hands of the native (which Masferré’s project can be seen as an illustration of) is a political and ideological move because of its assumption of a different kind of gaze. Masferré clearly wishes to claim a sense of *community* with the subjects of his photographs, in the way Benedict Anderson (1983, 15–16) defines the concept:

It is *imagined* [community] because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. . . . Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined. . . . Finally, it is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible . . . for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings.

Being “one of them,” Masferré could imagine such a comradeship with the people of the Cordillera and could begin to outline his photographic project. There is the wish to preserve the details of traditional life and culture before the technology coming not far behind the camera impinges on the landscape to change it forever. There is too the desire to help outsiders view the Igorots as “human beings with a rich culture, and appreciate the beauty they had made. . . . If they looked at the picture of Kabayo, they would feel he is not inferior. He looks as good as any American, and he is dignified. He is a noble human being” (Masferré 1988, 8). And yet the photographer’s gaze is limited because he himself is implicated in history if not in exactly the same way his subjects are, in a way that intersects with theirs.

To look at Masferré’s photographs as documentary also presents certain problems. The traditional idea of documentary is one that presents “true” images of people and “authentic” backgrounds and contexts. The assumption is that a voice, granted authority by means of some privileged position or entry point into the fretwork of cul-

ture, is speaking for these people and contexts, or that a sweeping gaze delivers a totalizing and panoramic view supposedly able to contain the real. Thus we have the hauntingly evocative, even epic, photographs of rice terraces, pine forests and steep mountains, with the outlines of the majestic *Gran Cordillera Central* receding into the fog-shrouded horizon.

Masferré's pictures of figures bent over in a line in a distant rice paddy, or of a warrior standing on the edge of a cloud-filled ravine, have been described as elegiac. They mourn the unstoppable passage of time over these people and their way of life. The photographer's attempt to fix his subjects with finality, to render them in a document (which act already anticipates their absence, their moment of departure from the physical scene) set up against a background of grandly looming, terrace-rippled Cordillera landscapes (so the idea of the individual's diminishment becomes visually clarified) becomes a way of rationalizing culture, translating, packaging and making it accessible for others.

As translations of Igorot life and culture, Masferré's photographs filter and select, render not a sequence of objective artifacts but the things he *chose* to frame and preserve. It is, for instance, impossible to escape observing how the old women (possibly *mambunongs* or priestesses) walking around a fire and chanting prayers for a newly married couple's *fertility*, have acquired an almost androgynous, arrestingly timeless, look. Another picture of ritual rice-pounding at a marriage feast captures the moment when all hands lift the long wooden pestles to describe a visually harmonious and symbolic circle. In another photo, the figures of potter and grandchild are for the most part hidden in shadow, save for a bit of the potter's face, her broad fingers, and the clay pot she has just made, which are caught in and accentuated by a shaft of light. In this area we see likewise the epistemological underpinnings and negotiations at work in Masferré's encounters with Igorot reality (reality being that which, according to Lacan, cannot be articulated but upon which the symbolic may be repeatedly inscribed and erected) (Lacan 1981, 60).

## Conclusion

A Spanish and American mission school-educated Masferré, wielding the symbol of authority and presence (the camera), is both the Igorot who looks curiously at the square object placed in his hands

and the object at which the Igorot looks from out of the background of the picture, with curiosity and sometimes more than a hint of challenge as is the expression on the face of the Bauko woman wearing *bistakaw* beads and what appears to be a large, unfastened safety pin in her hair—and a smaller one fastening her coat. At the same time that he presses the shutter button, Masferré observes the unfolding of his own story as an onlooker in Igorot life reflected in the object of his gaze. So it is that Masferré's images can be seen to occupy two realms: the first one takes the path away from St. Louis, making possible the reclaiming of the Igorots as symbols in contemporary discourses and debates on ancestral land rights; the other reflects the uneasy position of a "framer framed,"<sup>4</sup> equally implicated in the project of re-visioning the Other, conscious of the desire to project, partly by means of the elegant Masferré signature, an authoritative subjecthood upon the tenuous surface of the photograph. The subject is both Masferré and the people within the frames of his pictures. Masferré seems, too, to have been conscious of this to some degree, as evidenced by the picture he took of the arrestingly beautiful Ngibat girl with splayed feet he discovered, upon turning away from another group he was photographing, who was smilingly watching his every move.

Despite their participation in this ambivalent project, Masferré's photographs have a striking beauty because they render with loving detail the varied textures of traditional village life in Cordillera communities in the first quarter of this century. The intricate patterns of basketry and weaving are caught in the photographs' frames, and are repeated by lines and folds of skin. The slight blurring at the edge of a village storyteller's portrait conjures the mood of a fireside and reinforces a poetic theme. The pictures attempt to erect an aesthetics vastly different from that deployed (if there can be said to be one) in early nineteenth-century photographs of the Filipino, but one which is also doubled by its own unconscious predication on prevailing modes and tropes of cultural production. Masferré may not have heard the phrase "the noble savage," but nevertheless we encounter this mode of popular representation in some pictures, such as those that show villagers doing strenuous labors (balancing tiers of earthenware jars and pots on the head, carrying the harvest up stony hills, grubbing for snails, planting rice in the paddies) with apparent ease and fluidity. The penchant for minutiae and curiosities is sometimes still evident, as in the pictures of villagers engaged in

"little labors" like cleaning lice off each others' heads, in the pictures of very young children smoking fat, hand-rolled cigars, or in the few pictures whose purpose seems primarily the detailing of elaborate headdress and costume.

Some of the most powerful images that Masferré produced are those that capture a sense of the ritual importance of the multifarious aspects of life for the Cordilleran: for instance, the pictures of bare-breasted women pounding, husking or winnowing grain, gathering water or suckling children, project not an egocentric, erotic gaze but instead one that senses a strong, nurturing nature close to the rhythms of the soil and the seasons; or else, the pictures of villagers, young and old, women and men, thigh-high in grass or in water, enacting the rituals for assuring a bountiful harvest.

Masferré portraits also represent another "vanished" area in which we are allowed to glimpse Masferré's more "respectable" figurations of "Igorot identity" before the appearance of contemporary distortions (or extensions of the project as begun by photographers like Dean C. Worcester) such as those engendered by increased encounter with tourists who want to pose with "authentic" natives. What strikes one as a more accurate reason for the sad aura surrounding *recuerdos* is in this case not that time marked has passed and is irretrievable, but more that today's Igorots, now wearing the coat/top half of a western suit (appropriately rechristened the "*Amerikana*") over the g-string and too willing to pose for a fee, have inherited the colonizer's idea of photographic representation. Each photographic moment becomes a new opportunity for looking upon the photographic subject (be it a site, object or human being) as an item to be viewed from some perspective of superiority or privilege, a new opportunity for purveying a dominant culture's way of seeing.

Masferré's value lies in his ambivalent, alternating position within such a frame, and his own unapologetic stance towards it. Viewing his photographs, we become aware of the oscillations and disturbances that must have surrounded each photographic moment, and it is in this way that we are allowed to read them back in as we take back our images, the lost geographies of our bodies and souls, from history as it has been written by those who would colonize us.



## Footnotes

1. Igorot—the name given by the Spanish to members of six ethnolinguistic tribes in the northern Cordillera region. The name means “people from the mountains,” and sometimes appeared in Spanish documents as “Ygolotes” or “Igorrotes.” Members of these tribes themselves are often reluctant to admit the term, preferring to be identified by the name of their ethnic group (such as Bontoc, Kankana-ey, Kalinga, Tingguian, and so forth).

2. *Bodong*—the Igorot term for the ritual peace pact between or among tribes or ethnic groups. Afable notes that the Chicago group had little background knowledge of the *bodong* concept, of the Cordillera and of Masferré’s work—but finds it interesting that they had hit on an appropriate indigenous symbol and mode for mediation around which to figure their own thematics of positioning within mainstream American culture.

3. Prof. Clark Hulse’s comments on this paper; English Department, University of Illinois at Chicago, 14 April 1993.

4. Trinh T. Minh-ha’s new work (1992) discusses the politics of constructing meaning in the realm of the visual.

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