

Rethinking Categories: The Making of the Pahiyas

A hundred years after the leaders of the Philippine Revolution declared their archipelago a nation, Filipinos maintain an intense fascination for the developing shape of that body politic. We talk exuberantly — indeed incessantly — of the relative strength of kin and other allegiance groups in the fabric of the nation and the dynamic balance between our many similarities and differences.

We wonder aloud about the way we think in our tenacious vernaculars, even as we maintain fluency in universal languages. Particularly during elections, we carry on about the relationships between the ambitions in cities and the longings in rural areas and between charismatic leaders and their eager, if fickle, followers. As the 1998 century-mark of the declaration of Philippine independence

approached, we had impassioned debates about the historical narratives which instill pride — or demand pause. We conjured hundreds of ways of explaining who we are and why we do things as we do, all the while maintaining with certainty that our nation is built on a fundamental, and perhaps even stubborn, Filipino-ness.

At the start of work on this Philippine

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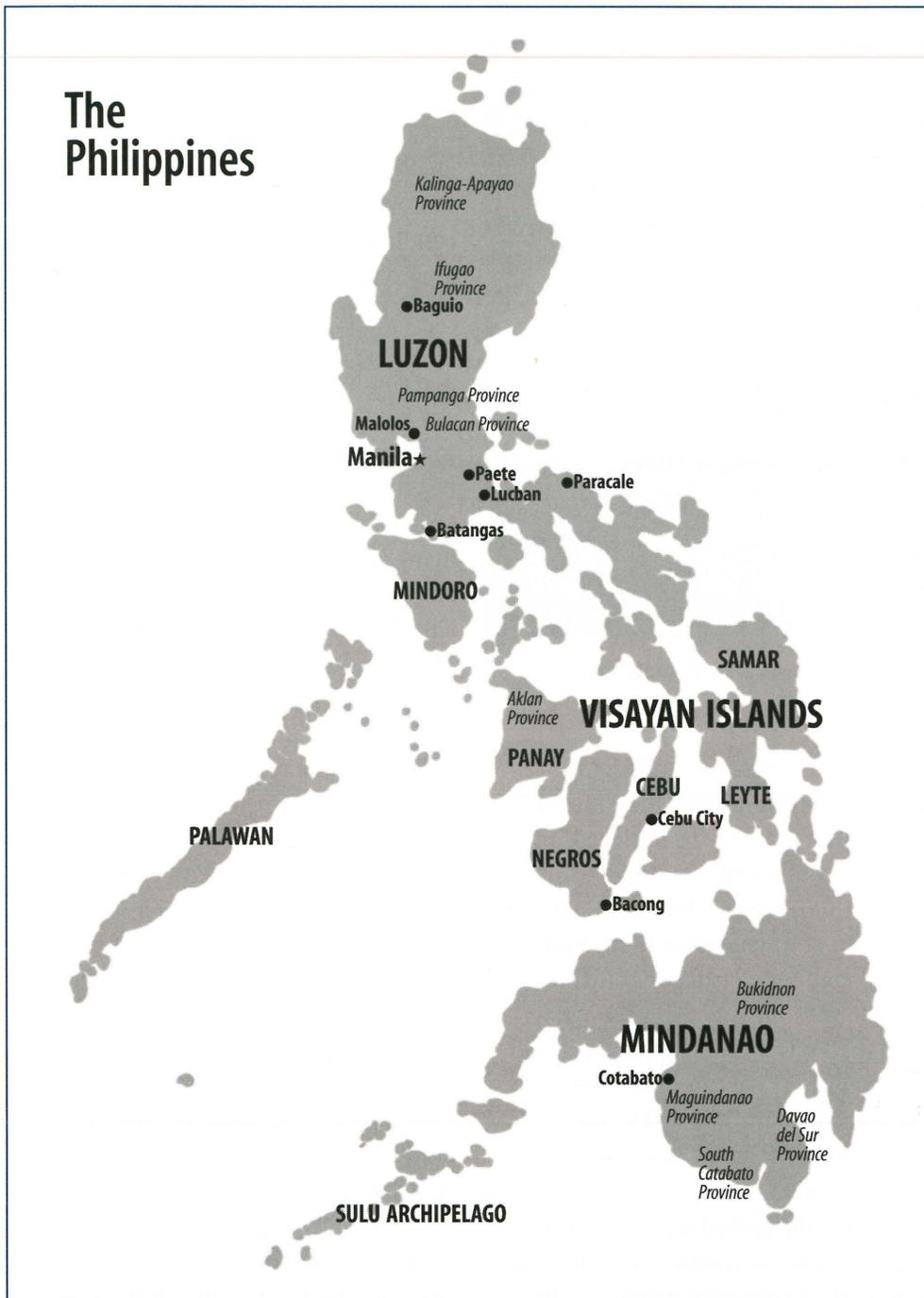
Festival program, the first order of business was to define an approach that engages not only how intricately we articulate identity and reweave tradition with 20th-century passions, but also how we do this while simultaneously expressing delight and dignity, vivacity and solemnity. The demand for accuracy of representation has been extraordinarily high. The project was negotiated by the Philippine Centennial Commission with the Center for Folklife Programs & Cultural Studies of the Smithsonian Institution in the context of the Philippine Centennial celebrations in the Philippines and of the associated events planned in many cities in the United States.

It has been clear from the outset that during these celebrations, Filipinos wish to signal our arrival at a juncture in history where we can enjoy a complex understanding of the deepest sources of our cultural pride. It has been clear that the project's goal is to express a sophisticated sense of the dynamics of folklife in a national formation. Thus, the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP), the implementing agency for the project on the Philippine side, assembled a project team of independent cultural workers and began working with the Smithsonian to create a Festival concept and presentation to communicate that sense of arrival and register that refined understanding.



A child watches the parade of the Pahiyas festival in Lucban, Quezon Province. Kiping, elaborate, colored, rice-flour designs, decorate the windows and balconies of houses throughout the town during this annual May harvest celebration. Photo by D. Martinez, courtesy Cultural Center of the Philippines

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A map of the Philippines highlighting the home-towns and provinces of Festival participants.

invested whole lifetimes in mastering their art forms. These artists have achieved such levels of virtuosity that there can be no doubt of the continued power of their forms to move people today, even across extremely wide cultural and social divides.

Early in the planning, the team decided to rethink the categories promoted by many previous presentations of Philippine culture which subsequent scholarship has shown to be “thin” and lacking in descriptive power. For instance, separate historical experiences have heretofore justified the now-standard division of Philippine peoples into low-land Christians, Muslims, and highland “pagan” or “tribal” groups. These categories, however, are not useful in understanding the cultural forms shared across contiguous areas of the Philippines.

Those similarities are pronounced despite differences in religious beliefs or experiences during the colonial period. Happily, co-curator Dr. Richard Kennedy endorsed the possibility, for instance, of exploring relationships among diverse musical traditions that use percussion instruments, or among celebrations and rituals associated with harvest, or among gift-giving traditions from all over the Philippines. Work on the Festival proceeded with great energy in anticipation of possibilities such as masters of carving traditions from Muslim, Christian, and animist groups sharing a single space, or cooks from a wide variety of Philippine culture areas demonstrating their common relationships with the food sources in the archipelago. More importantly, the project team felt the need to consider the links among art forms normally separated by the disciplines of those who study them. Hence our plans embody the hope that some viewers may intimate connec-

Conscious of the pitfalls of viewing tradition as a static legacy from the past, the research team under the direction of Dr. Lennette Mirano guided planning with a sure grasp of the persistence of traditional culture in contemporary experience. Dr. Mirano, program director Ramon Obusan, project manager Eva Marie Salvador of the CCP, and their respective associates each brought to the project the

benefits of long years of experience with cultural analysis and representation. The project has been built on their well-established connections with long-term efforts of cultural institutions and academic centers. In the course of working with, supporting, and helping articulate the special devotions of traditional artists, these institutions and centers have identified those rare individuals and groups in many parts of the Philippines who have



Staff of the Cultural Center of the Philippines carry out research near Lake Sebu, in southern Mindanao, in preparation for the 1998 Smithsonian Folklife Festival. Photo by Richard Kennedy

tions between weaving traditions and musical forms, and between the processes of metallurgy and those of food preparation. The project team also wanted to bring together a wide variety of beating and pounding processes — finishing cloth made from the *Musa textiles* (wild banana) plant, the drone melodies of gong music, repoussé goldworking, hulling rice with mortar and pestle — to convey a sense of rhythm that seems to be universal in the Philippines.

As long-time cultural workers, members of the project team were aware of the difficulties inherent in a festival — particularly one in a foreign land — which often make it impossible to communicate the nuanced relationships that exist in traditional contexts among artists, materials, processes, performances, and their audiences. Moreover, logistical limitations make it impossible to represent all Philippine languages, regional groups, or forms of traditional art. The Festival emphasis on local traditions, which may be long-standing,

inaudible at a distance, and highly dependent on context for their meaning, may require that they be abridged, amplified, or reconfigured. Framing the artists in physical structures that inevitably are simulacra of fragments of home and perhaps in conceptual categories that do not resonate with the way the artists understand their own experience also leads to compromise. These can make artists and audiences uncomfortable and lose an opportunity for cross-cultural communication.

However, the project team has taken these problems as creative challenges in their work of cultural translation. The meanings may not wholly carry over, but the effort is valuable in a world constantly recrafting ways to celebrate and honor those among us who courageously, inventively, and often joyfully carry a valuable past into the future. Our emphasis on relationships across domains embodies the Festival project team's determination to achieve fresh perspectives in translation.

The 80 Philippine master artists hon-

ored by the Smithsonian Institution and their nation have in common — aside from their exquisite levels of achievement — a strength of character that has enabled them to meet the challenge of modernity by accepting and reworking certain aspects of it. Many of the artists are savvy about recordings and other forms of documentation, marketing techniques, alliances with other communities and countries, public presentations, discussions, and political action.

Individually and as a group they lay to rest the weary stereotypes of the primitive or the abject rural peasant. Although many of them are poor by the standards of urban society, they all project a grace, a pride, and a sense of assurance which seem to issue from the aesthetic pleasure and wisdom inherent in their chosen art forms.

Finally, these remarkable artists share a common involvement in elaborate systems of exchange, reciprocity, and gift-giving — a theme we have chosen to highlight at the Festival. Their lives are essays on gift-giving: mentors of younger generations, diplomatic representatives to worlds outside their communities, custodians of artistic creation, performers and makers of the implements of celebrations. They represent the spirit of *pahiyas*, a word which collects notions of gem-like treasures and blessings. *Pahiyas* is a shower of gifts and blessings in the celebratory abundance of a harvest. Through these artists, the Philippines celebrates the centennial of its declaration of independence by asserting its freedom to construct the future with the culture of gift-giving.

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