

THE FORMATION OF ETHNIC AND NATIONAL IDENTITY: A CASE STUDY OF THE LAHU IN THAILAND

TATSUKI KATAOKA

Kyushu University, Japan

INTRODUCTION: THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The theoretical concern of this report is two-fold. One is the flexibility of ethnic identity, and the other is the possibility of an 'alternative nationalism from the bottom' in Asia. Although both issues, based on the case of the hill tribes of Thailand, are related to each other, ethnic-level identification and alternative nationalism are parts of a macro-level struggle in constructing national identity.

Some issues raised from the discussions of changing ethnic identities of the hill tribes in Thailand

Since Leach published *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, the flexible nature of ethnic identification in mainland Southeast Asia (hill societies in particular) has been discussed. Based on the Kachin case, Leach (1964:285-6) argues that the difference between the Kachin and the Shan is a matter of political modelling rather than the cultural or racial matter that anthropologists expect. He also maintains that the Kachin and Shan themselves "recognise that these differences are not absolute – individuals may change from one category into another."

This issue of flexibility in complex ethnic relations in mainland Southeast Asia was raised again in the 1980s and 1990s when Kammerer (1990) and Tooker (1992), specialists on Akha culture, submitted a model of ethnic identification that was determined by custom rather than by birth based on their observations from their Akha field sites. The essence of their argument is that, in the Akha worldview, each ethnic group has its own custom (*zan*) and ethnic identification is determined by the custom practised ('carried' in the Akha sense). This means that an identity shift is expected to occur whenever somebody changes a custom to 'carry'. Although sometimes referred to as religion, the Akha traditional system of custom or *zan* is not limited to

the strictly religious but is rather of the holistic kind, one that encompasses almost all aspects of social life (Alting von Geusau 1983).

As for Akha Christians and Han Chinese who have assimilated into the Akha community, Tooker (1992:800) explains this in the following way: "(To) be an Akha, ethnically, is to practice the Akha 'religion' (and vice-versa). All three identities mentioned above (Akha, Christian, Chinese) are *adje tshoha*, 'types of people'. ...The switch from Akha to Christian is seen by the Akha as equivalent to the switch from Chinese to Akha (or vice-versa). ...Identity switches are seen as switches of behaviour or *zan* whereby one 'becomes' (*pjeq-e*), one of another 'type of people' (*adje tshoha*)." She also says that such identity changes as 'Akha becoming Christian' and 'Chinese becoming Akha' 'violate common sense Western notions of identity' (Ibid).

Arguments on 'identity systems of highland Southeast Asia' persuade us to reconsider or revise conventional notions of ethnic identity. However, some theoretical questions arise at this point. If ethnic identity can be changed by changing customs, it is impossible for an Akha to claim multiple identities (i.e. Akha and Christian, Akha and Chinese, etc.). The reason is that one cannot follow two customs simultaneously given its holistic nature. When a villager of Chinese origin decides to follow the Akha custom, or when an Akha converts to Christianity, it must be supposed that his custom is no longer Chinese in the former case, or Akha in the latter case. This contradicts the well-known fact of multiplicity of ethnic identities that is commonly seen in complex ethnic relations in Southeast Asia. One of the purposes of this project is to examine this Akha model of identity change that is supposed to be determined by custom.

The place of the hill tribes in the quest for 'nationalism from the bottom'

Another theoretical concern of this project is on the emergence of 'nationalism from the bottom' in Asia that supposedly stems from the 'alternative knowledge of the peasants'. Such a notion has been gaining popularity in contemporary Thailand, especially since the 1980s when the problems of capitalist-oriented development policy came to be questioned by a wider public.

This paper intends to examine two aspects of the issue. First, I will take the Thai intellectuals' arguments on the 'local wisdom of the hill tribes' into account. Then I will consider different views of 'alternative knowledge' as shown by the hill tribes themselves in the process of socio-cultural change.

It is widely argued that the promotion of 'local wisdom' inherited from ancestors is of vital necessity for sustainable development. This local wisdom is an alternative, bottom-up concept of knowledge that challenges the existing elitist view of the 'ignorant peasant'. The hill tribes of Thailand are supposed to 'have knowledge or wisdom to manage natural resources sustainably'. The typical proof cited of the value of such knowledge is, apart from the agricultural technology itself, the traditional worldview of the existence of guardian spirits of the forest who are propitiated by annual rites.

However, from an anthropological viewpoint, such arguments leave questions unanswered. First, advocating traditional spirit worship as local wisdom may result in a too uniform image of 'traditional religion of a community' to reflect socio-religious changes and the religio-cultural diversities coming from such changes. The second question is that advocacy of local wisdom itself is essentially an initiative by urban-based intellectuals, and concepts of alternative knowledge as expressed by the villagers themselves 'from the native's viewpoint' tend to be disregarded. One of the main goals of my research is to investigate these questions by field research in the villages of the Lahu, one of the hill tribes that have been heavily influenced by both Christian evangelism and Chinese religious tradition.

Secondly, I will compare the place of the culture of the hill tribes, who are slash-and-burn cultivators, in academic debates in Thailand, with a similar case in Japan in order to explore the question of 'nationalism from the

bottom in Asia' in a comparative perspective. Through recent debates over local wisdom as mentioned, the Thai intellectuals present it as alternative knowledge to replace the existing top-down view of national culture stressed by modernizing (Westernizing) elites.

Here is a parallelism between this school and the Japanese folklore movement in terms of the construction of national culture with multi-ethnic origins. Both challenge existing elitist views on national culture by presenting alternative, peasant-based, pluralistic views. In both cases, the location of the culture of slash-and-burn farmers as ethnic minorities becomes crucial. The last part of this project focuses on parallelisms and differences in the location of such minority culture in both countries in the quest for an 'alternative national culture from the bottom'.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The concept of 'custom' and ethnic identification among the Lahu in the process of social change

The focus here is on the relationship between 'custom' and 'Lahu-ness' in the process of religious change. Materials used here are collected from my field research in two Lahu villages, namely village M and village R. Both are located in Chiang Rai province. All 48 households of village M have a long history in the Christian faith (American Baptist), whereas 70 out of 100 households of R village practice Chinese religious tradition.

In Lahu, an equivalent of the Akha *zan* or 'custom' is called *aw li*. *Aw* is a prefix to a noun while *li* comes from a Chinese word which originally means 'etiquette'. Although *aw li* can denote 'religion' in a particular context, the connotation of this concept is, like the Akha *zan*, broader than religion in the Western sense, for *aw li* includes concepts of courtesy, culture, or customary law as well as religion. It can be said that *aw li* is traditionally a holistic system of regulation to control both inter-human relationships and relationships between people and supernatural beings. It is natural to expect that an identity switch, as stressed in the Akha model of identity system mentioned by Kammerer and Tooker, can occur among the Lahu whenever one changes custom by marriage, migration, or religious conversion.

Most of the villagers of R regard themselves as Lahu even though they practice *Heh pa aw li* or Chinese

customs. The villagers raise such examples of *Heh pa aw li* in terms of annual rites as follows:

- Chinese New Year (*Xin nian/ Chun jie*);
- Repairing a grave (*Qing ming*);
- Burning pine (*Er shi si/ Huo ba jie*);
- Midsummer festival of ancestor worship (*Qi yue ban/ Zhong yuan jie*); and
- Harvest moon (*Ba yue shi wu/ Zhong qiu jie*).

Apart from these annual rites practiced according to the Chinese lunar calendar, people offer joss sticks to honour their ancestors in altars built in each house each first and 15th day of the month following Chinese tradition.

The villagers explain the history of R village in the following way: “Some generations ago, when we were in Burma, many Chinese *Kuomintang* soldiers came to the Lahu village to take Lahu wives and live there. At that time, these *Kuomintang* soldiers were on hostile terms with the Burmese government and they disguised themselves as Lahu so that they could escape government suppression of the Chinese. By living with the Lahu and using their language, later generations have become Lahu.”

It is noteworthy that these Chinese ‘have become Lahu’ while maintaining their traditional customs. Their Lahu spouses replace their traditional Lahu *aw li* with a Chinese one while maintaining their ethnic Lahu identity. The villagers are fluent in both Lahu and Yunnanese Chinese. All of them are listed as Lahu in government statistics but they are Yunnanese Chinese in the list of the Taiwanese aid project.

This example of village R assumes that ethnic identification is flexible. However, ethnic identification has not been ‘switched’ from Chinese to Lahu (or vice-versa) but one has been ‘added’ on top of another. Such complex ethnic identity indicates that it is not determined by custom alone. One can be Lahu by birth and Chinese in terms of custom. Ethnic identification can be additive without the switching of customs, and sometimes it can remain the same even when customs are switched.

In this light, it can be said that some scholars’ emphasis on the flexibility of identity among the hill tribes of mainland Southeast Asia, for example, simply by switching off their ‘Lahu-ness’, seems to result in an

over-simplified image of the ‘non-essential’ nature of ethnic identification.

Let us consider the other case, that of the Christians of village M. What has to be noted is that, for the Christians, *Lahu aw li* never means religion. Regulations on marriage, ritual exchanges during New Year celebrations, and traditional customary laws, all examples of *Lahu aw li*, are not considered religious matters. The word for religion is *bon li shin li*, which forms a sub-category of *aw li*. *Bon li shin li* literally means ‘customs of blessing’. Another sub-category of *aw li* referring to ‘non-religious custom or culture’ is *chaw li va li* or, literally, ‘customs of human beings’. In this sense, praying to God during annual rituals (New Year and harvest time) is not a Lahu custom but a religious practice. On the other hand, the New Year dance, the ritual exchange of rice cakes, and the ritual washing of elders’ hands are Lahu customs with no religious meaning.

This indicates that newly introduced Christianity is, contrary to what some scholars have proposed, not regarded as equivalent to traditional Lahu custom. After the Christian conversion, the concept of *aw li* has been divided into the ‘sacred’ and the ‘secular’, between ‘religion that controls the relationship between man and god’ and ‘customs that control human relations’.

There are some non-Lahu members of village M: Chinese, Wa, Akha, Akheu and Kachin who migrated into the Lahu village after marriage. They are sometimes referred to as ‘having become Lahu’. They themselves claim that they no longer practise their old customs and have become Christian (i.e. *Nga Hui Heh pa aw li ma te, Bon ya te ve*). In this context it is quite plausible to conclude that for the hill tribe Christians, some scholars claim (cf. Keyes 1996; Tapp 1989; Kammerer 1990), ‘being Christian’ means ‘being Lahu’, and ‘Christianity functions to maintain the ethnic boundary.’ In this sense, it is supposed that Christianity is equivalent to traditional concepts of customs that function to define ethnic boundaries.

However, close observation leads us to another conclusion when we recall the separation of religion from secular custom among the hill Christians. The statement, “I no longer practice Chinese customs and now I am a Christian,” literally means that they have abandoned *Heh pa aw li*. However, the idea that

this replaces only the religious aspects of traditional customs tells us nothing about their secular life after conversion. If they have abandoned Chinese customs totally in order to be assimilated into the Lahu, we expect the religious part of Chinese customs to be replaced by Christianity and the secular part by *Lahu aw li*. Therefore, when they say, "We are not Chinese but Christian," there is a hidden meaning: "We have accepted the Lahu custom after conversion." In reality, it is this unspoken statement that determines whether somebody is Lahu or not, and so determines 'Lahu-ness'. The function of boundary maintenance by Christianity is rather limited.

In some cases Chinese migrants and their children, who are mixed Lahu and Chinese, are called 'Chinese' as well as Lahu. In this context, it is clear that custom is not the reference point to determine ethnic identification. They are Chinese only because their ancestors were Chinese. More interestingly, Lahu spouses of these Chinese immigrants are also called 'Chinese' in some instances. The Lahu wife of a Chinese migrant becomes *Heh ma* or 'Chinese woman' as well as *La hu ma* (Lahu woman), and her Chinese husband can be called *La hu pa* or 'Lahu man'.

These examples from village M tell us that conversion from *Lahu aw li* to Christianity does not result in the replacement of the traditional holistic custom system as an ethnic boundary, but in the separation of traditional custom into religion and secular custom. After conversion, the Lahu Christians remain Lahu not because Christianity functions as the ethnic boundary in spite of its foreign origin, but because secular custom continues to define 'Lahu-ness' regardless of religious faith. Close observation of the migrants' case further demonstrates some unique aspects of Lahu-ness ethnic identification is not only determined by custom as some scholars would expect, but also by birth and spouses' attributes.

Theodicy and 'alternative knowledge'

Among the Lahu, both traditionalist and Christian, the theme of knowledge is closely related to the question of Theodicy. The term 'Theodicy' employed here follows Weberian usage: a question concerning the contradiction between the existence of the Almighty and imperfection of this world.

It has already been pointed out that the hill tribes of

mainland Southeast Asia construct their identity *vis-à-vis* their lowland neighbours, namely the Han Chinese, Shan, Burmese, or Thai, by 'negative identification (cf. Tapp 1989)'. This means that they identify themselves in negative forms of questioning: "Why do they have a state (king, book) and we do not?" Among the Lahu, who are unique among the hill tribes in that their belief in the Supreme Creator, *g'ui sha*, is prominent, this kind of negative identification manifests itself a seriousness of Theodicy: "If God is almighty and we have faith in Him, why are we poor, suppressed, and illiterate while 'they' have everything?"

This question of Theodicy is reflected in the narratives of the 'loss and return of the book' in Lahu mythology. The story is about the creator-god (*g'ui sha*) who once appointed the Lahu as the rulers of the world and gave them a book of life written on rice cakes. However, the Lahu were careless and ate the rice cakes. In anger, the god struck the Lahu from their ruling position and made them suffer illiteracy and suppression by other groups. However, when the book is returned, god will appear again to restore their sovereignty.

The Lahu themselves recognise their own illiteracy and ignorance. The story of the 'loss and return of the book' is an expression of their feeling of inferiority as well as of their desire for 'alternative knowledge' to counter the lowlanders in power.

Among the Christians, the church officially claims that the book mentioned in the myth is the Bible and it was returned by way of the missionaries. A Japanese anthropologist Nishimoto (2000:104-5) comments that the Lahu Christians, as an effect of 'the civilizing project' of the church, "value 'knowledge' from modern education" and that "a concept of 'wisdom' in non-written form cannot find its place in the mainstream of Christian Lahu (ibid:107-8) discourses." On the other hand, he stresses that "the Lahu are also proud of their good skills in working in the 'forest,'" for "they regard the 'forest' as their territory."

His comments might support activists' intention to construct a counter-ideology of 'alternative knowledge' as wisdom based on villagers' forest life as opposed to the existing 'scientific' or 'developmentalist' concepts of knowledge. However, I have never met such expressions as 'praising the forest as their territory' in the field. On the contrary, the villagers always regard the forest (*heh*

pui hk'aw) as 'the place for exploitation given to human beings by His will at the Creation' or 'the residence of demons that are to be driven away'. The forest is clearly categorised as opposed to the 'human world' by the binary code of 'culture-human-village/ nature-non-human-forest'.

However, villagers often show their pride in their 'ignorance' when they criticise the religious establishment, government officials and Chinese merchants. A typical expression of such 'criticism' is the following: "They have knowledge of the book and are rich in this world while we have nothing. But books are human products and knowledge based on it is valid only in this world. We cannot read books but our hearts are always seeking God. No matter how poor, suppressed and ignorant we are in this world, the Divine Kingdom is our place, not theirs." In this context, 'ignorance' as well as 'poverty' function as synonyms of 'piety' and 'ignorance' as a condition for 'grace'.

The extreme example of such a concept of 'salvation by ignorance' is expressed by Ca nu Hpa ya, who claims to be a 'man-god' and was once a leader of the non-Christians before he 'met Jesus Christ'. After conversion he claimed to have 'the power of the Holy Spirit' to cure the sick. He explains his power in the following manner: "It is mentioned in the Bible that the Holy Spirit is working in the world. Pastors know a book but they do not know God in their hearts. I am His vehicle and the Holy Spirit works through me, not through them. The conditions to be used by Him have nothing to do with knowledge of the Bible. He chooses His vehicles only by His wish."

Here we see an essential similarity between Ca nu Hpa ya's concept of 'power' (*kan pa*) and ordinary villagers' affirmation of their ignorance. They commonly stress that ignorant piety is the ultimate condition of power that has its origins in God's will. Literacy is the fruit of human effort but 'power' is the perfect knowledge of God. 'Alternative knowledge' as expressed in this context is a 'gift from the God' or charisma in the Weberian sense, rather than inherited skills of forest life.

Unlike the Christians, for the 'Sinified' Lahu, the teachings of the creator-god have declined and his position has been replaced by the Chinese lesser deity *shan shen*, a guardian spirit responsible for village affairs.

In village R, the creator-god is mentioned only in the context of the origin myth and he is never worshipped in ritual occasions, although the villagers affirm that their ancestors once participated in a messianic movement that promised the return of the god and the book. The 'Sinified' religion of village R can be categorised as 'traditional' in the Weberian concept whereas Christianity is a 'rationalised' one.

Religious questions of theodicy also seem to have disappeared among the villagers. For traditionalists the imperfection of the world cannot betray their deities because these deities respond only to ritual offerings, not to piety or belief in doctrine. The occurrence of problems does not reflect on the righteousness and power of the god; it simply means that the deities need extra offerings or that rituals were performed incorrectly. These 'traditionalised' aspects of religion point to the lack of 'alternative' religious narratives of the concepts of knowledge.

The place of 'hill culture' in Japan and Thailand

There are a few parallelisms between Japan and Thailand in terms of the academic debates on the place of the culture of shifting cultivators in society. Such culture is the focal point of current peasant-based pluralistic models of national culture.

Suzuki (1991) states that Kunio Yanagita, a founder of Japanese folklore studies, tried to establish the nation's new subjectivity in Modern Japan. His focus on the religious belief of *jomin* or 'common man' is the struggle to construct 'nationalism from the bottom' to counter existing 'official nationalism' or 'nationalism from the top' as represented in state Shintoism (Suzuki 1972). Indeed, in his early manifesto of folklore as a new science, Yanagita (1939:7) says that the object of folklore studies is the construction of a way of life and a way of thinking for the common people. In this sense, Yanagita and his folklore studies pursued an anti-elitist 'alternative knowledge'. Morse's (1990:86-87) comments on this point constitute a challenge to both Eurocentric enlightenment thoughts and Westernizing bureaucratic elites.

Yanagita's (1976) focus was partly on *sanjin*, or, literally, 'peoples of the hills', who were indeed the most distant from the educated intellectuals. He thought that the multi-ethnic origin of the Japanese nation consisted of the *sanjin*, the indigenous hill folk, and the lowlanders,

relatively new immigrants. According to him, the *sanjin*, after being conquered by lowland wet rice cultivators, tried to escape the lowlanders' political control by fleeing to the hills and were able to maintain their cultural distinctiveness until quite recently.

He was later inclined to present more conventional view on the homogeneity of Japanese culture based exclusively on wet rice cultivation, and so the *sanjin* were gradually eliminated from the category of *jomin* or the would-be Japanese nation. However, in the postwar period, when open discussions on Japanese history were permitted, Yanagita's early model of *sanjin* was rediscovered and the multi-ethnic origin of Japanese culture was once again revived.

Among them, Miyamoto (1968) assumed Yanagita's early hypothesis that the hill peoples were once engaged in hunting and slash-and-burn agriculture until they were culturally assimilated into the mainstream in recent times. Tsuboi (1979) noted that the *sanjin* celebrated the New Year with taro instead of rice cakes, the most important item of the Japanese New Year feast. He showed that the culture of wet rice cultivation was a relatively new *sanjin* practice, and that customs based on taro and cereals cultivation in slash-and-burn style preceded it. Sasaki (1971), employing Nakao's concept of 'the culture of *Lucidophyllus forest*' (1966), further demonstrated that this type of cultural complex not only forms an important part of the basic Japanese culture especially on the hillsides but was also widespread throughout the East Asian hills.

One of its implications is that the Japanese *sanjin* culture, that was discovered in postwar folklore and anthropology, shares common features with those of the hill tribes of northern mainland Southeast Asia and Yunnan, China. With the *sanjin* way of life slowly disappearing after a long process of assimilation into the mainstream culture, Japanese folklorists and anthropologists have turned to Southeast Asia and Southern China to supplement the 'missing link' as they try to re-construct the history of the multi-ethnic formation of the Japanese nation.

The 'local wisdom' school shares a common orientation toward national culture with the Japanese folklore movement. First, the Thai intellectuals of this school generally reject the Western type of scientific knowledge and the modern capitalism that is behind it. Rather,

they value the specificity of the peasant way of thinking in an unwritten form to counter the 'universality' of Western knowledge, just as Yanagita did.

Second, their emphasis is on *chat* or nation, rather than *rat* or state (cf. Chatthip and Siriphon 2000:43). It has been argued in Thailand that the category of 'nation' independent of 'state' has been 'stunted' (Anderson 1979). Now they want to challenge the top-down style of 'official nationalism' by presenting an 'alternative knowledge' of the nation that consists of people of multi-ethnic origin. They consider the hill tribes, labelled 'ignorant outsiders' by the bureaucratic elites, as part of the nation with their own special knowledge system.

This seems similar to Yanagita's project to construct a new bottom-up concept of a modern nation of multi-ethnic origin. In terms of the emergence of a national consciousness, the hill tribes of Thailand and the *sanjin* of Japan share similar functions, although the Japanese concept of *sanjin* is a rather retrospective one while the Thai intellectuals' arguments on the knowledge of the hill tribes clearly target present-day political issues.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this project have some implications for contemporary discussions of the construction and change of ethnic, or national, and cultural identity in Asia.

On the flexibility of ethnic identification

We have examined two propositions: one on ethnic identity switching through changes in customs, and, two, that Christianity functions as an ethnic boundary in spite of its foreign origin. These models clearly demonstrate that ethnic identification is flexible and has nothing to do with inherited traditional culture. In this sense, these models 'violate' the commonsensical conceptualisation of ethnic identity.

However, it seems that some anthropologists' stress on 'anti-essential' aspects of ethnic identification is too exaggerated to reflect social reality. I have demonstrated that attributes by birth as well as customary practices still function as important factors in determining ethnic identification among the Lahu Christians and the followers of the Chinese tradition alike. On occasions of inter-ethnic marriages or the replacement of customs, the factors that define ethnic identity are layered

one on top of the other rather 'switched' from one to the other. It can be concluded that a more nuanced understanding of ethnic identification is needed so that we can approach these studies from the 'natives' point of view'.

On the 'alternative knowledge' of the hill tribes

The same applies for arguments regarding the 'alternative knowledge' of the hill tribes. As far as my field data are concerned, the villagers rarely express their 'wisdom of forest life' in the manner that activists might come to expect. Expressions of 'alternative knowledge' among the villagers studied consist of answers to the question of Theodicy concerning salvation and have nothing to do with their ability to safeguard the forest. Intellectuals' efforts to promote local concepts of 'knowledge' may find no counterpart in the hills.

On 'nationalism from the bottom'

The arguments of the 'local wisdom' school have some implications for Asian nationals. Comparisons between

Japan and Thailand demonstrate that common aspects among Asian nations in terms of present pluralistic bottom-up images of the nation emerge when taking hill tribes into account. It is noteworthy that in the present context, the hill tribes of Thailand provide information that may well revise existing uniform views of national culture in Japan as well as in Thailand.

Findings from this paper show that, at the present time, the hypotheses presented by some scholars regarding the formation of ethnic identities and alternative knowledge do not conform to the experiences of the hill tribes examined. Nevertheless, this should not deter the quest for 'alternative knowledge' and an 'alternative nationalism' that presents a more pluralistic bottom-up concept of national culture that may be used to improve the lives of the marginalised.

REFERENCES

- Alting von Geusau, Leo. "Dialectics of Akhazan: The Interiorisation of a Perennial Minority Group." *Highlanders of Thailand*. Eds. John McKinnon and Wanat Bhruksasri. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1983.
- Anderson, Benedict R. O'G. "Studies of the Thai State: The State of Thai Studies." *The State of Thai Studies*. Ed. Eliezer B. Ayal. Ohio: Ohio University, Center for International Studies, Southeast Asia Program, 1979.
- Bunthian Thongprasan. *Naeo khit watthanatham chumchon nai ngan phatthana*. Bangkok: Sapha Katholik haeng Prathet Thai phua Kan Phatthana, 1988.
- Chatthip Nartsupha. "The Community Culture School of Thought." *Thai Construction of Knowledge*. Eds. Manas Chitakasem and Andrew Turton. London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1991.
- Chatthip Nartsupha and Siriphon Yotkamonsat. "Naeo khit sethakit haeng chat kap kan phatthana sethakit Thai." *Setthasat Kanmuang* 15 (2000).
- Kammerer, Cornelia Ann. "Customs and Christian conversion among Akha Highlanders of Burma and Thailand." *American Ethnologist* 17 (1990).
- Keyes, Charles F. "Being Protestant Christians in a Southeast Asian World." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 27.2 (1996).
- Leach, E.R. *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure*. London: The Athlone Press, 1964 (first published in 1954).
- Miyamoto, Tsuneichi. "Yama to Ningen." *Minzokugaku Kenkyu* 32.4 (1968).
- Morse, Ronald A. *Yanagita Kunio and the Folklore Movement: The Search for Japan's National Character and Distinctiveness*. New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1990.
- Nakao, Sasuke. *Saibai shokubutsu to noko no kigen*. Tokyo: Iwanami Shinsho, 1966.
- Nishimoto, Yoichi. *Lahu Narratives of Inferiority: Christianity and Minority in Ethnic Power Relations*. Chiang Rai: The Center for Inter-ethnic Studies, Rajabhat Institute Chiang Rai, 2000.
- Sasaki, Komei. *Inasaku izen*. Tokyo: NHK Books, 1971.
- Suzuki, Mitsuo. "Bon ni kuru rei." *Minzokugaku Kenkyu* 37.3 (1972).
- . *Yanagita, Origuchi igo*. Tokyo: Sekai Shoin, 1991.
- Tapp, Nicolas. "The Impact of Missionary Christianity upon the Marginalised Ethnic Minorities: The Case of the Hmong." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 20.1 (1989).
- Tooker, Deborah E. "Identity Systems of Highland Burma: 'Belief', Akha Zan, and a Critique of Interiorized Notions of Ethno-religious Identity." *Man* (N.S.) 27 (1992).
- Tsuboi, Hirofumi. *Imo to Nihonjin*. Tokyo: Miraisha, 1979.
- Yanagita, Kunio. *Minkan denshoron*. Tokyo: Kyoritsusha, 1934.
- . "Sanjinko." *Tono monogatari, Yama no jinsei*. Tokyo: Iwanami Bunko, 1976.

IMAGINING NATIONS AND COMMUNITIES THROUGH MUSEUMS: THE POLITICS AND AESTHETICS OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN JAPAN AND THE PHILIPPINES

CECILIA S. DE LA PAZ

University of the Philippines, Philippines

INTRODUCTION: PROJECT DESCRIPTION AND OBJECTIVES

This discourse examines the museum practice that deals with displays of 'everyday life' in view of the politics of public culture, in the context of the modern condition. In an era where 'globality' is encroaching on a nation's political, economic, social and cultural agenda, the presence of a significant variety of museums dealing with traditional ways of life (peasants) and folk objects, presents a problematic issue of representation and identity construction of Asian societies such as Japan and the Philippines, who are grappling with modernity and its effects on everyday life.

Recognising the dangers of museums' presenting an exotic gaze on 'othered' ethnicities and communities for urban consumption, we can ask, what kind of aesthetics are being constructed and for what purpose? How is the issue of identity being addressed in such a museum and for whom?

Keeping in mind the importance of differences in the mode of production and reception of displayed objects, people as individuals and as a collective construct offer meaningful significance to what a museum represents in civil society. Museums are spaces where the discourse of an authentic culture through exhibits of 'everyday life' is transformed into 'displayed life.' In the midst of criticism of the prevalent 'self-orientalisation' or 'nativism' in ethnographic and folk museums, or even national museums, there is a need to re-evaluate the role of such public institutions so that they can address the politics of identity construction and a nation's imagination of itself.

It is this paper's premise that the museum is a negotiated and contested space concerned about the issue of ethnicity, wherein different people are able to locate

a nation's sense identity or identities. A comparative study of the particular contexts of the museum practice in Japan and the Philippines will therefore be fruitful and strategic: Japan's history having been marked by a strong state, economic success with rapid modernisation, and narratives of homogeneity; and the Philippines having experienced colonisation, economic mismanagement, and political instability within an archipelago of cultural diversity.

Therefore, the paper aims to accomplish the following: 1) assess and evaluate museums in Japan and the Philippines that deal with 'everyday life' as sites of 'identity construction' in the context of the modern condition; 2) problematise the concept of ethnographic museums and folk art museums as products of Western rationalisation but appropriated by two Asian nations with their own particular needs and social condition; 3) provide a comparative analysis in the study of aspects of Asian culture and historical experience as an alternative body of knowledge to Western exoticism; and 4) recognise the role of museums in their various forms as powerful instruments of identity construction, aesthetic valuation and political signification.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE MUSEUM GAZE AND PUBLIC CULTURE

Working on the premise that culture is a social construct, a contested and negotiated field of knowledge and articulation, then a critique of the museum gaze is timely in Asian societies immersed in questions of identity within the context of encroaching globality. In more ways than one, museums communicate to a disparate audience or communities, forging an artifactual or artificial experience of homogeneity, being as they are spaces where social tensions are ironed out and made sensible. With the intention to reveal the politics of collection and to display to an enlightened viewer the

call of the times is to be more sensitive to people's lives that are sometimes exploited in the name of culture. The themes of 'politics of representation', 'identity construction', 'art dichotomies' and 'orientalisation' will be problematised in this paper as a contribution to the debates on modernity, civil society and globalisation.

A main concern of the paper is the museum's role in creating a public culture as part of civil society. Economic activities, social life and cultural affairs are all constructed within civil society and the strength and resilience of a social order reside in the capacity of civil society to aid in shaping the direction of change. As Ivan Karp aptly puts it, "Civil society is the crucible in which citizenship is forged .. more than a mosaic of communities and institutions, civil society is a stage, an arena in which values are asserted and attempts at legitimation made and contested (Karp 1992)."

As an important element in civil society, museums articulate social ideas. They define relations with communities, whether they intend to or not. They construct central and peripheral identities because of particular narrations, aesthetic privileging and political-economic interests. Museums, when considered as integral parts of civil society, often justify their existence on the grounds that they play a major role in expressing, understanding, developing and preserving the objects, values and knowledge that civil society values.

However, the following questions remain: Who decides what items are representative of people's lives and experience, and should therefore be collected? How are social relations forged in the politics and aesthetics constructed in the museum practice? What values are silenced by the museum practice and what are advanced as true and authentic? As Karp has observed, the traditional roles of museum – collecting, preserving, studying, interpreting and exhibiting – are now under scrutiny by communities marginalised by the museum gaze. The realisation that the museum audience does not passively accept what they are made to see is to point to the complex and changing nature of public culture. For better or for worse, there is a wide acceptance in civil society that museums are spaces for defining who people are and how they should act, and for challenging outdated and oppressive representations.

The second issue that the paper deals with is the concept of representation that arises from imagining selves,

nations and communities in the museum gaze. Using Benedict Anderson's notion of 'imagined communities' and Hobsbawm's and Gennels's 'invented tradition', we can examine nations such as Japan and the Philippines as cultural constructs created by the intellectual elite and appropriated in the political and economic policies of the state. As Hobsbawm has suggested, it is a mistake to think of a 'nation' as an unchanging social entity. It is rather of a 'particular and historically recent entity, relating to a certain kind of modern state (Hobsbawm 1990)'. When we think of nation as a project, we can imagine it as an artifact, an invention and as a product of social engineering that enters into the making of nations. With this point of view, the concept of a nation is not a static one, but an active engagement with people's imagination that partakes in this 'nation-building'.

METHODOLOGY

The paper intends to analyse the space of the museum in its totality so that its collection and curatorship, as well as its architectural features will be seen as meaningful signification of a negotiated representation of culture. The following methods were used to achieve its objectives: 1) field observation in museums in Japan and the Philippines where a multi-disciplinary approach of art criticism and cultural studies was used; 2) archival research in the history and culture of both countries; and 3) interviews with museum professionals, cultural officers and the museum audience.

Almost all major National Museums in Japan and the Philippines were visited, significant folk art museums studied and a sampling of special interest museums included. I made it a point to visit the museum first as a regular visitor so that I could experience the museum collection afresh, following the established or suggested curatorial flow of the display that is akin to a narrative or story being presented.

From the perspective of museum studies, a visitor's experience inside and outside a museum, and the rules that he or she must abide by will affect the way that visitor will construe his/her personal valuation of the display. The architectural style, height, dimension of the exhibit halls, as well as material texture, light, sound and sometimes, smell (or the lack of it) affect the viewing of an exhibit. In some ways, viewing an exhibit is akin to the experience of religious spaces because of the implied importance and sacredness of the space, and

to the experience of a theatre performance, where the viewer is a member of an audience passively receiving information, albeit in a traditional museum set-up. Keeping in mind the political dimension of the manner of display – whether this be the cabinet of curiosity, a glass showcase, an installation, dioramas, multimedia technology and/or an interactive mode – I share these thoughts as an observer of culture, as well as of myself embroiled in a constructed world of meanings.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS: THE DISPLAY OF EVERYDAY LIFE AND CULTURAL APPROPRIATIONS

Museums dealing with things used in everyday life assume that there are specific ways of seeing and valuing that can be taught to urban culture, which is marked by its 'stranger mentality' – the absence of community solidarity. We do not actually 'know' our neighbour because there is nothing that ties us beyond the family: except for a network of friends and professional colleagues.

Therefore the modern city has to create cultural symbols so that people can have a sense of commonality and communality that will bind people together, imagining, feeling and acquiring the same things. As state apparatus and as arbiter of what is acceptable or not, museums contribute to the notion of a homogenous culture. They engage in the production of knowledge that vie for space in the modern Japanese consciousness, especially in urban areas such as Tokyo, where a museum boom from the 1970s until the 1990s was observed together with rapid urban development.

In the Philippines, a boom in museum structures and practice has been slow in coming as it is only now that museum professionals are being trained. Moreover, there is an absence of a cohesive cultural agenda on the part of the state at both the national and the local levels.

Based on the observation of a rising number of museums in industrialised counties in Asia, I note that the elements needed to cultivate an interest in museums are following: a strong state policy that engages in 'global and local' realities, financial patronage of the business sector, a professional sector or advocates interested in museum work, and communities that feel the need for preserving an ideal life overtaken by a rapidly changing social environment. On the last point, one might say that an ethnic community would not see the

importance of displaying its community for itself if that culture were still being lived and experienced. However, an urban audience has more need for appropriated life experiences to create a sense of a nation authenticated by ethnicity.

National museums and the culture of collecting

We can say that the idea of nations is intimately intertwined with the idea of national museums as markers of its achievements over the passage of time. We remember the story of Noah in the Bible, who saved as many living things as he could in his famous ark, and felt the need to classify and organise God's creations for a promised future (Elsner and Cardinal 1994). The birth of national museums follows the same pattern: first is the felt need to collect so that the past is brought to the present; second is the impetus to organise and classify so that collections become meaningful; and last is the language of display: for how does one exhibit collections that would be cohesive and representational of interests of the state and its people for a diverse public? Objects from everyday life are imagined to be saved from the deluge of time, natural catastrophes and social upheavals to serve as a stable repository of the past for a continuously changing present.

We can also observe that the chosen sites of national museums are symbolic of the cultural claims of the economic and political centres of a nation. Significantly, the concept of a national museum is a claim to civilisation, so that more than the objects, the context of viewing and its attendant atmosphere are as important. For example, architectural massiveness is always present and in tune with the vastness of the collection that characterises museums in Tokyo, Kyoto, Nara and Osaka, where national representations of 'Japanese-ness' are constructed. As historical are the buildings that depict western-inspired Meiji architecture, these museums are distinctly Japan's, organised on the discourse of 'inheritors of East Asian art', formed through a nationalism shaped by past imperial dreams.

A national identity that is founded on East Asian art through the prominence of Buddhist art as national treasures clearly places Japan as the inheritor of the great tradition of China (interestingly, not of India), dramatically lit in darkened interiors. Museums imagine themselves in terms of history and projection so that Kyoto still sees itself as the centre of Japan, while

the vast collection at Minpaku (National Museum of Ethnology) in Osaka might be viewed as an attempt to organise and classify the cultures of the world through thousands of everyday objects, in a dizzying array of displays. Minpaku best exemplifies the conflation of time and space – display rooms assume worlds that are comprehensible and knowable, free from global tensions and ruptures.

Since an empire can only be worth its name through its colonies, the Ainu and Okinawan are relegated to curiosities for an urban audience. Displayed in the traditional manner of cabinet curiosities and hands-off curatorial style, the textile and implements of these cultures are seen from a distance and out of context. For an urban audience introduced to these objects, the tendency to exoticize is great. Since no interactive display is available, one cannot lay claim to it because no sensory stimulation was permitted. In a sense, one cannot touch and feel the minority's identity, if seen only from a distance. Japan's attempt to develop a 'culturally-oriented nation' as espoused by the Agency of Cultural Affairs, is therefore undermined by the museum practice of centre-periphery relations that mirror the social inequity and attitudinal bias for the unstated centre.

The concept and collection of the Philippine National Museum started in the latter end of the 19th century under Spanish colonialism, experienced a tumultuous history during the American rule and the World War II bombings, and the loss of important artifacts to influential museums abroad. In the last decade, the museum was rehabilitated upon its transfer to the Finance Building originally constructed during the American occupation. Claiming to be 'The Museum of the Filipino People', the National Museum's method of display has been modernised to include interactive programmes side by side with archeological, ethnographic and thematic displays.

It promotes a strong awareness of the diversity of ethnicities that form the nation, although it is mostly silent on the Muslim identity and its sense of history. The main problem with the national museum is financial (despite the name of the building which houses it) as evinced in the policy not to light and turn on interactive displays if only a few visitors are around, for example, and in the absence of handouts for elucidation. In a world of meaningful relations, the

exhibit rooms are named after banking institutions!

In Japan, on the other hand, people include museums as a likely place to visit in their leisure time again and again, according to the seasonal changes of the exhibits. A similar consciousness has yet to be instilled into the Filipino audience because sans the benefit of an organised group tour, it is difficult to persuade Filipinos to visit a museum. One possible explanation for this phenomenon is the absence of a felt need to view a displayed version of the life that continues to be played out daily. It could be that the Philippines urban culture has not rapidly changed the everyday landscape, where traditions persist alongside social change. Yet, whether there is an interest in them or not, as part of civil society, museums in the Philippines appropriates various ethnic emblems and objects as the bases of the Philippine nation.

Folk craft museums in the urban context

Since the Meiji period, the constructed boundaries of the 'nation' of Japan have used folk crafts symbolically and economically, in relation to the West and to unify the nation radiating from the urban centres. Museums and cultural centres have been created in their name, civic associations have been formed, and craft communities engineered for their preservation. They have come to signify Japanese culture, here and abroad.

In the Japanese discourse, the idea of 'folk craft' has taken on varied permutations as *kogei* (craft), *bijitsu kogei* (art craft), *ryosan kogei* (mass-produced craft), *dento kogei* (traditional craft), *mingei* (people's craft), *mingu* (folk tools) or simply as *getemono* (common things). As a human creation and as a cultural construct, the category of craft has always struggled between 'art' and 'industry', culture and commerce, design and mass production. The ambiguity of craft as a man-made creation must also be contextualised in the dichotomy born out of the dividing spheres of knowledge constructed in the Period of Enlightenment in the West.

With the privileging position of *bijitsu* (fine art) and the individual genius in the cultural discourse, crafts for utilitarian use were relegated to the status of 'minor arts'.¹ Nations that developed under the tutelage of the West have struggled with this dichotomy, and in the course of cultural nationalism have reclaimed the right to call their 'crafts' as their rightful 'art', claiming a privileged position in the cultural representation, as has happened

in the Philippine. Being a product of colonial rule and social inequity, the privileging of art over craft is also tied with social, political and economic interests.

An interesting aspect of Japanese craft that is widely known in western discourse is the theory of *mingei* or *minshuteki kogeï*, literally meaning ‘popular craft’ or ‘people’s art’, coined by philosopher and writer Soetsu Yanagi in the 1920s. Per this theory, *mingei* works are the objects used in our daily life, made by the ‘unknown craftsman’ – a metaphor that means a craftsman is working within the traditional methods and ethos of a craft community, and has no desire for individuality which is the mark of a self-conscious artist in the fine arts tradition.

That the work should speak for itself and not the name of the craftsman was a powerful enough message that captured the imagination of so many intellectuals at that time so as to create a *Mingei* Movement. It finally resulted to the setting up of the Japan Folk Crafts Museum in 1936 with the help of businessman Ohara Magosaburo, indicating the role of Japan’s powerful business sector in influencing public culture.

It also produced a nationwide membership consisting of crafts people, intellectuals, collectors and connoisseurs; a magazine; broad acceptance in the international scene; and a substantial network at that time. So did it bring forth a *mingei* boom well up to 1975, when demand for craftwork was so great that craftspeople experienced wealth never imagined before (Moeran 1997).

Built as a traditional roof-tiled Japanese house, the uniqueness of the museum’s outside appearance is evident when compared to its surroundings and to the architectural design of most modern museums. One enters by manually opening a wooden door, in marked contrast to the modern-day experience of automatic doors. Once inside, one is asked to leave one’s shoes in the front and to wear slippers from a pile in a big basket.

These unique features of the museum, based on the Japanese traditional custom of leaving one’s shoes before going inside, serves two purposes – first, to retain the cleanliness inside while walking along the wooden corridors and exhibit rooms and second, to signify a practice or metaphor to leave the outside world at the doorstep and be transported into the *mingei* experience.

Most visitors feel surprised at this novelty. It is in this sense that visitors are made to experience the idea of a ‘traditional home’. No extraneous sound is evident, apart from people’s footsteps treading on creaking wooden floors, inviting contemplation of the object as an aesthetic experience. There is not much of an attempt to explain the individual objects, as their objective is aesthetic contemplation, not the accumulation of data and scientific know-how.

Notice that the emphasis of the *mingei* philosophy is on the process of doing and using – the mode of production (communal) and the mode of reception (utility) – resulting in the so-called aesthetics of use. The theory is certainly reacting to the mechanisation of production due to industrialisation, the use of synthetic materials, and too much individualism in an industrialised-westernised society. But let us examine the imagery of the so-called ‘unknown craftsman’ – he is toiling at his work, as his father and ancestors before him, creating the same craft, economically poor, earning just enough for his daily needs, unschooled and with no desire to change – a much romanticised imagery of innocence and nostalgia of what Japan was in the Edo Period.

We can say that to buy *mingei* is to consume this wealth of meanings and imagery – perhaps to symbolise a *urusato* or old hometown that is fast disappearing in Japan’s march as leader to an industrialised and urbanised world. To consume and partake of *mingei* objects in the home or restaurant where pottery is part of the aesthetics of Japanese food presentation, are all attempts to bring ethnicity into everyday life and to homes in the city. One is always in contact with his or her Japanese-ness through the material and visual environment of a situated ethnicity.

In the Philippines, the terms ‘art’ and ‘craft’ would be problematic to traditional communities where spheres of knowledge are intimately intertwined despite modern encroachment. In the academe, there are attempts at a discourse on folk art called *sining bayan* or *katutubong sinig* with aesthetics based on an environmental and a social context. Since the fine arts come from a western tradition, the traditional folk crafts shaped by the diverse Philippine landscape are seen as bastions of ethnicity, honesty and purity. It was in the 1970s that folk art gained ground as a valid inspiration for the creation of a national culture.

Two reasons may be cited: the first was the cultural agenda of the Marcos conjugal dictatorship to use folk cultural emblems for tourism showcases and for the export industry, as well as a visual language of the notorious and invented 'Filipino ideology'; while the second was the nationalist movement in the academe that turned away from Western paradigms and looked at indigenous ethnic communities and their knowledge as liberating models and directions in a post-colonial society.

Given Imelda Marcos' claim to be a cultural messiah, many structures were built in the 1970s in which the divide between the elitist fine arts and the folk arts was created. One such structure was the Museum of Philippine Ethnography in the Nayong Pilipino Park, where displays of everyday life and objects such as textiles, mainly from the indigenous groups of Northern Luzon and Southern Mindanao, were exhibited. The display underscored the cultural context of the textiles but the orientation was mainly visual and discouraged interaction.

In addition, the touted representations of the Philippine village as an open-air museum loses much of its credibility when the attitudinal concerns of the staff cum guides are economic, i.e. to make you buy the array of souvenir folk art items or tourist art. The staff of each 'regional' house openly welcome visitors, especially those with flashy cameras which they seem to regard as a signifier of buying power (To test, I hid my camera during my next visit, and I instantly became unimportant in the scheme of things).

One thematic exhibit on the Filipino way of life is that entitled *Diwa: Buhay, Ritwal at Sining* at the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP), which also houses the *Museo ng Kalinangang Pilipino*, in a small gallery. The main problem of both is accessibility to the public and the symbolic meaning still associated with the CCP, however misplaced, as a Marcosian creation. In both, in situ (context) displays are attempted using mannequins that give approximations of how people lived in the past and how they live today. But the resulting display is one of exoticism – of faraway static communities untouched by modernity (except for the Converse brand of shoes worn by a male mannequin in the *arquivo* tableaux).

The contemporariness of culture and its possible emergence are subsumed as unchanging, coming from

the past, a 'narrative of loss' – loss of innocence, of purity, of meaning – all for the benefit of tourists and an urban-based audience. Yet in our own history, indigenous communities have experienced many encroachments and exploitation from the outside world in the name of imperial dreams and display. For one, they were exploited in an international exposition at the turn of the 20th century, when they were shipped to the United States to perform like displayed objects in the middle of winter. Many died during that journey, forgotten and lost in historical memory.

Nowadays, there are attempts to correct the sins of the past through the conferment of such awards from the state as Gawad Manlilikha ng Bayan (National Living Human Treasures) to traditional artists who are into weaving, pottery, basketry, music and the performing arts, in order to promote the traditional as high art (De Leon 1998). Alongside the award comes the responsibility on the part of the awardees to create 'Centres for Living Tradition' where indigenous knowledge can be taught and transmitted. Funded by the government over the last five years, the awards' effects on these communities and on social relations within and beyond them, have yet to be seen. What is significant about the concept of the centre is that it replaces the traditional museum where it is clearly not needed.

There are current thoughts that the whole idea of ethnographical museums should be destroyed or at least re-framed to avoid the dangers of exoticism and self-exoticism now prevalent in public culture, as seen in – street parades/dancing by 'natives' during town festivals or when foreign tourists arrive. Since this type of museum is a product of Western imperialist dreams that patronise people rather than elucidate social realities, what should take its place in the project of imaging the nation?

There are suggestions of 'climate museums' or 'region museums' (Hudson 1991) that will encourage the use of all five sensory perceptions – sight, hearing, taste, touch and smell – to simulate reality and avoid the sterile, safe, controlled and tension-free environment of the ethnographic museum. Certainly, this suggestion is almost akin to the theme park where 'reality' is created in the presence of thrill rides and danger, or to open-air museums requiring tracks of land and strong financial support. In the Philippines, this would be difficult in the light of financial difficulties confronting cultural

work. However, a more engaging museum programme, one with interactive displays that address all the senses, is not an impossible undertaking given the Filipinos' capacity to think creatively during difficult times.

Community museums and civil society

Imagine in urban Tokyo a museum dedicated to capturing life during the Edo Period, both in terms of size and atmosphere.² Imagine, too, the same concern for atmosphere in a museum in Osaka so that day and night activities are simulated in a span of 30 minutes through special effects created via multimedia.³ Imagine, as well, the same concern in Tokyo and Sapporo where they have transformed hectares of land into an entire village, complete with everyday conversations and the concerns of a bygone age.⁴

Clearly, nostalgia for traditional lifestyles is alive and well in Japanese museums these days. In these eco-museums where the concern is for context rather than connoisseurship, one does not only see displays but touches and interacts with things, objects and space. It is in this sense that Japanese museums are it much more akin to the language of theme parks, being as they are – a conflated narrative of society with an element of surprise and discovery.

The Ainu museums in Hokkaido are also interactive and rely on informative guides to the traditional house and performances.⁵ Traditional clothing and musical instruments constitute an impressive show of the admirable cultural traits of the Ainus. However, a prolonged observation in one museum resulted in a reality check: the Ainus only put on their costume when visitors arrived and promptly took them off when the visitors left. The practice is a metaphor of sorts – a situational ethnicity – such that when one is observed, clothing serves as armour that lays claim to authenticity, which the majority culture denies. Following the long struggle of the Ainus for acceptance in Japan's imagination of itself, it might be said that Ainu museums represent the cultural sphere of the struggle alongside the political and social concerns.

In the Philippines, we have begun to re-assess the museum practice in the light of local realities, coming face to face with political and economic marginalisation, as well as globalisation in the form of diasporic communities comprised of millions of Filipinos working abroad. And recently, a widening interest in the

institution of local museums has been springing up in the regions as local communities grapple with their own sense of identity, as well as with the political symbolism of having a museum in a small town.

In Mauban, Quezon for example, there is a concerted effort on the part of the local government to start a local museum based on the felt need for it 'to be a destination' as this community struggles with uneven development (it plays host to a multinational power plant, just as it does to insurgents belonging to the New People's Army). Poverty and the lack of opportunities have pushed generations of its people to migrate to the United States where from a position of economic affluence, they have supported the cultural initiatives of the town such as a theatre group, street dancing during festivals and maybe, soon, the local museum. Hopefully the resulting display of Mauban culture will not fall prey to 'exoticisation' or 'orientalisation', but will face the changing social-scape and environment leading to an empowered representation of its people.

It is also noteworthy to cite the case of the Museo Ilocos Norte where traditional life is represented through farming implements and manifestations of Spanish influence on everyday life. The narrative on a historical tobacco factory-turned-museum tells of how the patronage of the elite can hasten the establishment of a local museum. However, a conversation with one of the guides reveals this interesting feedback: non-Ilocano visitors appreciate the display more than do the Ilocano people themselves. The reason is that Ilocano visitors expect in museums displays of fine art objects alone and certainly not of everyday life that is easily found outside the museum's walls. While the intention of the museum is to promote the Ilocano heritage among its people, the museum has begun to establish a wider arena for the definition of art. Nowadays, the money for maintenance comes from the earnings made by the souvenir shops, from solicitation and fundraising activities.

The process of reification of folk art objects happens when everyday things become acquirable possessions, as happened in the Cabanatuan City Museum in 1992. It being my hometown, I helped the local government at that time to start a historical and thematic exhibit on this fast-changing city. To build up the largely on-loan temporary collection at the museum, we borrowed from the rural barangays a huge *kawa* or *talyasi* that this village used for cooking during collective celebrations

and events. Come opening day, the decontextualised *talyasi* was transformed: the everyday object became art by virtue of the museum space it occupied. It drew the interest of antique collectors.

Museums appropriating everyday folk materials also contributed to the idea of acquirable art mostly for urban consumers of culture, pointing to a democratisation of symbolic and material culture. Yet a reevaluation of folk art is in order to widen its definition enough such that it would incorporate notions of 'cultural justice', and face the fact that the objects we admire so much also connote meanings of unequal relations, of urban and regional development, and of marginalisation in the national imaginary. We only need to be reminded of the T'boli culture's exploited people whose land was encroached upon by a multinational corporation that grows pineapples for the global market. T'boli textiles and brassware are now so popular and widely accepted as national treasures in our country, even as the province of South Cotabato from where they hail has time and again become a site of recurring and unresolved violence in Philippine society.

IMPLICATIONS: TURNING MUSEUMS INTO SPACES OF ENGAGEMENT

What we construe as 'Japanese culture' or 'Filipino culture' is always mediated by invented concepts and agencies of modernity: nation-state, schools, media and museums. As Stuart Hall has suggested, "The nation-state was never simply a political entity. It was also a symbolic formation – 'a system of representation', which produced an 'idea of the nation as an imagined community', with whose meanings we can identify and which through this imaginary identification, constituted its citizen as 'subjects' (Hall 1999)."

Yet, just as we are citizens shaped by our particular society and culture, so must it also be recognised that people are active social actors with the capacity to re-create or re-invent themselves in every context and milieu. Museums then can be an instrument of both suppression and empowerment by addressing the issue of perspective on what constitute the everyday: For whom is the representation? Who benefits from the discourse of authenticity? Why is the discourse of an everyday life that is rooted in an idyllic past important to a modern audience?

In the agenda of imagining a nation, a lived experience

by its indigenous communities becomes the carrier of ethnicity, perhaps as a reminder of what was before modernity. Consider again the problematics of displaying *mingei* or folk craft in a museum: First is the contradiction of its advocacy when we remember that the ultimate criteria of *mingei* is that it be used, for utility, yet the unspoken message of the museum is one of display and status. Second, the soaring prices of the once inexpensive objects are the result of *getemonos* being declared as *mingei*. Like it or not, museums as purveyors of cultural value push the prices of inexpensive things to exorbitant levels. Urban craft shops compete for a limited number of crafts that comes from craft communities. A *mingei* boom has resulted in a change of lifestyles, social organisation and the social relations of a community in post-war Japan.

One such example is the village of Sarayama in the south, where ten families collectively worked for hundreds of years producing Onta pottery ware before its discovery in 1931 by *mingei* connoisseurs. According to a recent ethnography, with the *mingei* boom and rising demand for crafts, the residents ceased to work on their fields, focusing on orders, and building their own kiln instead of using the communal one (Moeran 1997). Thousands of tourists have tramped to Sarayama in search of the true *mingei*.

And of course, tour operators catering to tourists, mostly women, affected the works produced. Rarely is the large pot made now, given the low demand for it. What is in demand, instead, are small pottery outputs that tourists buy, that are more suited to the tastes and needs of modern-day client-consumers. *Mingei* craft has become acquirable art, with status and an ethnicity that can be consumed and brought to one's home and enjoyed in 'ethnic' Japanese restaurants.

Ten families benefited from this *mingei* boom, which raised their standard of living and allowed them to improve houses, buy land, and build their own climbing kiln. And with government recognition of the Onta tradition as an Intangible Cultural Property, the families in the village were conferred the title National Living Treasures. Accompanied by an annual stipend⁶ and national distinction, these awards generally confer status to an individual or group, attendant to which are bestowed duties and the responsibility to continue and teach the tradition.

It is in this regard that we can see the state's effort to control the dynamics of culture so that the politics of 'authentic-ness' would be preserved and maintained. Nothing is left to chance and hopefully, nothing will change. To paraphrase what one official I interviewed said, craftsmen are discouraged to indulge in experimentation with other designs, or to adopt other traditions into their work, as this would constitute a 'dilution' of the tradition.⁷

Whereas before, artists were social agents who interacted with the realities of their social environment for their work, the active role of the state has created the traditional craft as representations of the nation-state appropriating the local tradition for a national audience and economically affluent cosmopolitan citizens. Craft has become heritage in Japan, which operates on the 'narrative of loss' (Clifford 1988).⁸ And with state intervention to create a 'culturally oriented nation', the effort to construct an unchanging and controllable cultural environment is legitimised – a craftsman's individuality is not encouraged to emerge, not because of the effect of social relations, but because of an disembodied control system – much like Foucault's panopticon.

In the case of Tono, a small city in the Iwate prefecture, regional development came hand in hand with the idea of 'discovering Japan and Japanese-ness', through its re-invention of itself as a 'pastoral museum-park city' (Yamashita 1995). Aiming to be a typical 'rural city' and using the catch phrase 'homeland of folklore' (*minwano furusato*), Kunio Yanagita's famous book *Tonomonogatari* or *The Tales of Tono*, written in 1910 with rich folk imagination, was appropriated to become the basis of the Tono City Museum built in 1980, to represent the traditional village of Tono.

For such rural cities that depict the invisible Japan which modernisation has marginalised, tourism is promoted as the core of regional development, emphasizing 'old, traditional Japan'. The desire of local communities to create an identity of their own – in other words, to be a destination – is the context which folk craft now inhabits. Folk craft has been appropriated for purposes of regional and local identities, to counteract their perceived marginalisation vis-à-vis the favoured large urban centres.

Mingei has had, and still continues to have, great impact

abroad and in Japan, probably because it has fulfilled the psychological vacuum experienced by people living in urban industrialised environments, and has met Western expectations of oriental exoticism (Kikuchi 1994). It has created a space for acquirable art for urban consumers of culture, pointing to a democratisation of symbolic and material culture. Yet a revaluation of folk craft is called for in order to widen its definition to incorporate notions of 'cultural justice', amidst the fact that the objects we admire also connote meanings of unequal relations of urban and regional development, and of marginalisation in the national imagination.

How then do we turn museums into live, cultural spaces of engagement thereby freeing them from the confines of being mere 'narratives of loss'? As a component of public culture, the museum's role must be defined beyond 'collection and display', and the notion of the museum audience turned into one of an actual community with stakes in its representation. It must rather be of people and communities having the power to reclaim historical memories and create meaning for themselves, rather than having this meaning given to them didactically.

The role of nation-states and their relation to museum must be reviewed to be more engaging with the public, to become more people-oriented rather than object-oriented. Such transformation necessitates more programmes of dialogue and museum education, in the hope of encouraging multiple perspectives on issues concerning a changing society, of communities having social connections with other communities.

We hope for museums that will develop an audience not primarily of connoisseurs, but of socially aware individuals. Collaborative curatorship must be encouraged as this is a terrain of hybrid meanings involving multidisciplinary approaches and knowledge, of working with the community of people themselves. Only then will the display of everyday life be valid – if it articulates unspoken hopes and tensions in civil society – the past and present clearly connected, the problems of centre and periphery also actively resolved.

Notes

1. From the socialist and Marxist perspectives of art, this was truly an elitist view so that when William Morris and John Ruskin founded the British Arts and Crafts Movement

at the start of 20th century, it became a direct challenge to the formalist and academic understanding of art, or of art for art's sake. People create objects not for their own sake but in the context of the needs and values of a community of people. For them, humanity can only be regained from the industrialised world if people create their own craft. In the West, the golden age of folk art was the medieval period when craft guilds built cathedrals anonymously and collectively. But the Art and Craft Movement soon succumbed to its own contradictions, overtaken by the events of the 20th century.

2. Tokyo Metropolitan Edo-Tokyo Museum.
3. Osaka Museum of Housing and Living.
4. Edo-Tokyo Open Air Architectural Museum and Historical Village of Hokkaido.
5. The Nibutani Ainu Cultural Museum in Sara-gun, and the Ainu Museum in Shiraoi-cho.

6. ¥3 to 5 million for a group per year and ¥2 million for individual/annum/for whole lifetime. For individuals, it is noteworthy to mention that many of Yanagi's artist craftsman friends (Shoji Hamada, Serisawa, Tomimoto who later on parted ways with Yanagi, among others) were conferred the award and the prices of their work are 'unimaginable'. However, one exception is Kawai Kanjiro who refused the award, rightly recognizing that he could not claim the right to say that his works are *mingei* if he acknowledges his individuality as an artist.

7. Mr. Sasaki of the Agency for Cultural Affairs, 13 Sept. 2001.

8. James Clifford said "Modern ethnographic histories are condemned to oscillate between two meta-narratives: one of homogenisation, the other of emergence; one of loss, the other of invention."

REFERENCES

- Agency for Cultural Affairs. *An Overview of Japan's Policies on the Protection of Cultural Properties*. FY 2000.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso Edition, 1983.
- Christ, Carol Ann. "The Sole Guardians of the Art Inheritance of Asia: Japan and China at the 1904 St. Louis Fair." *Positions East Asia: Cultures Critique (Special Issue: Visual Cultures of Japanese Imperialism)*, 8.3, winter, (2000): 675-709.
- Clammer, John. *Contemporary Urban Japan: A Sociology of Consumption*. UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1997.
- Clifford, James. *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988.
- Crafts Gallery, The National Museum of Modern Art. *Crafts in Everyday Life in the 1950s and 1960s*. Tokyo, 1995.
- De Leon, Felipe. "Traditional Art is High Art: A Question of Perspective." *National Living Treasures Awards*. Manila: National Commission for Culture and the Arts, 1998.
- Elsner, John and Cardinal, Roger, eds. *The Cultures of Collecting*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994.
- Hall, Stuart. "Culture, Community, Nation." *Representing the Nation: A Reader (Histories, Heritage and Museum)*. Eds. David Boswell and Jessica Evans. London: Routledge, 1999.
- Hobsbawm, E.J. *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Hudson, Kenneth. "How Misleading Does an Ethnographical Museum Have to be?" *Exhibiting Cultures*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991. 457-64.
- Japan Craft Forum. *Japanese Crafts*. Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1996.
- Japan Folk Crafts Museum. *Mingei: Two Centuries of Japanese Folk Art*. Tokyo: International Programs Department, The Japan Folk Crafts Museum, 1995.
- Karp, Ivan and Levine, Steven. Paper prepared for the First Workshop of Asian Public Intellectuals on the theme "The Asian Face of Globalisation: Reconstructing Identities, Institutions and Resources." Shangri-La Hotel, Cebu City, Cebu, Philippines.
- Karp, Ivan and Levine, Steven. *Exhibiting Cultures*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991.
- Karp, Ivan, et.al. eds. *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992.
- Kikuchi, Yuko. "The Myth of Yanagi's Originality: The Formation of Mingei Theory in its Social and Historical Context." *Journal of Design History* 7.4 (1994): 247-66.
- Moeran, Brian. *Folk Art Potters of Japan: Beyond an Anthropology of Aesthetics*. Great Britain: Curzon Press, 1997.
- Museum Foundation of the Philippines. *Guide to the Museum of the Filipino People*. Manila: Museum Foundation of the Philippines, n.d.
- Perlas, Nicanor. *Shaping Globalisation: Civil Society, Cultural Power and Threefolding*. Manila: Center for Alternative Development Initiatives (CADI) and GlobeNet3, 2000.
- Umesao, Tadao et.al. eds. "Japanese Civilisation in the Modern World: Collection and Representation." *Senri Ethnological Studies* no. 54. Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology.
- . "Japanese Civilisation in the Modern World: Nation-State and Empire". *Senri Ethnological Studies* no. 51. Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 2000.

Wagatsuma, Hiroshi. "Problems of Cultural Identity in Modern Japan." *Ethnic Identity: Cultural Continuities and Change*. Eds. George De Vos and Lola Rmanucci-Ross. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975. 307-34.

Yamashita, Shinji. "Tourism and the Creation of Culture: Case in Bali, Indonesia, and Tono, Japan" *Culture in Development and Globalisation* (Proceedings of a series of symposia held in Nongkhai, Hanoi and Tokyo). The Tokyo Foundation, 1995. 112-8.

Yanagi, Soetsu. *The Unknown Craftsman: A Japanese Insight into Beauty*. Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1972.

Yoshino, Kosaku. *Cultural Nationalism in Contemporary Japan*. London: Routledge, 1992.