

# **SITUATING PHILIPPINE THEATRICALITY IN ASIA: A CRITIQUE ON THE ASIAN-NESS / PHILIPPINE-NESS OF PHILIPPINE THEATRE(S)<sup>1</sup>**

Sir Anril Pineda Tiatco  
National University of Singapore / University of the Philippines  
(siranrilpt@nus.edu.sg / siranrilpt@gmail.com)

## **Abstract**

In this essay, a homogenized / essentialized Philippine theatre identity proposed by the celebrated Philippine theatre scholar Nicanor G. Tiongson in his seminal essay "What is Philippine Drama?" is interrogated. Tiongson's essay has become a canon in Philippine Theatre Studies. It will be argued that his assertion of homogeneity in the theatre culture of the Philippines is not exclusively a local scholarship articulation. Pieces of literature on Asian Theatre Studies (or in a microcosm level - the Southeast Asian theatre scholarship) oftentimes invoke a direct opposition of the West and the East and that the East is a singular cultural entity. In the first few pages of the essay, the concept of "Asian-ness" as implicated in Asian Theatre is scrutinized. Following this is an argument on how Tiongson's essay engages in the same essentializing exercise as in Asian theatre discourse. It will be asserted that the continuous theoretical discourse should not be focused on the construction of an Asian theatre identity or in the case of the Philippines, the Philippine theatre identity but the affirmation of Asian theatre identities or the Philippine theatre identities.

*Keywords: Asian Theatre, Philippine Theatre, Homogeneity vs. Heterogeneity, Theatre Identities, Asian Theatres, Philippine Theatres*

## **Introduction**

Nicanor G. Tiongson's seminal essay "What is Philippine Drama?"<sup>2</sup> is now considered one of the important theoretical foundations in the practice and discourse of theatre in the Philippines. In the essay, Tiongson makes two general points.<sup>3</sup> First, he posits a problem in Philippine theatre scholarship. He states that the evolution of drama and theatre in the Philippines is "obviously shaped by the

evolution of European and American drama” and “it is clear that the use of these concepts can only be prejudicial to the study of Philippine, even Asian, drama.”<sup>4</sup> His proposed solution is “to avoid ‘polluted’ theories of theatre in our time, and search for the soul that gives life to drama, wherever one may find it, in whatever form one may chance upon it.”<sup>5</sup> He claims that to completely understand the theatres in the Philippines, one should at once dismiss lessons learned from American and European lenses.

Second, Tiongson asserts that in evaluating the “Philippine-ness” of Philippine drama and theatre, three essential characteristics must always be considered: reflecting Philippine culture, answering the needs of the Filipino people, and working for the good of the many. Culture in this essay is understood in three levels: “material culture, metaphysical culture, and economic structure that are mirrored in social classes and in religious as well as governmental institutions.”<sup>6</sup> Entertainment is considered not entirely as an urgent need. According to him, it is more about educating and moving the Filipino audience into action. Finally, he states that “a play may truly be called Philippine, not only if it reflects Filipino culture, not only if it answer the needs of entertainment, but most especially, if what it exhorts to is the final liberation of the masses.”<sup>7</sup>

In 1996, Nicanor Tiongson was interviewed by Catherine Diamond, a scholar of Southeast Asian Theatre. Tiongson, then Artistic Director of the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) explained that the major thrusts of his program were to separate the foreign from the native Filipino culture and to establish a national Filipino culture through the arts. As emphasized in the manifesto of the CCP, the center was established “to promote and uphold what is truly Filipino with the ultimate view of tapping, developing and promoting a national Filipino culture that is reflective of the life and ideals of the people.”<sup>8</sup> It is interesting to note that Tiongson recognized some changes in the social conditions of the Philippines. He mentioned that a new nationalist project emerged after Marcos was overthrown. He explained decentralization as the new nationalist agenda. According to him, there was a need to assimilate other regions in the discourse of nationalism and national identity. Nationalist strategy during that time was about the “integration” and the “recognition” of other regions in the formation of the nation.<sup>9</sup>

Broadly speaking, assimilation refers to a process where other groups gradually adapt to the culture of the prevailing culture. Arguably, it may also be understood as the blending of other groups to the dominant group. Together with CCP; PETA, the National Commission for the Culture and the Arts (NCCA) and the University of the Philippines (UP) took part in this assimilationist project of nationalism. These institutions went to the provinces and conducted workshops with the aim of introducing various national standards in art production. Through these various workshops, it is as if the regions were being honed to establish art practices based on the principles of nationalism promulgated by theorists and practitioners of the National Capital Region.

In 2008, the University of the Philippines staged the first national *komedya* festival. Tiongson was one of the keynote speakers in the conference component of the festival. In his keynote speech,<sup>10</sup> his concepts of nationalism and national identity were once again invoked. This time he was more specific. He asserted that *komedya*, a theatre form that popularly deals with the conflict between the Muslims and the Christians, reveals a sense of nationalism resonating the heroic stance that Tagalog revolutionists engaged during the Philippine Revolution against Spain in 1896. Also, he explained that *komedya* is the theatre form that speaks of a national cultural identity, which he was theorizing in his influential essay.

Tiongson's agenda has not changed. The assertion of nationalism and national identity are always invoked either the liberation of the masses or an essentialized cultural identity based on fixed standards. Gayatri Spivak states that after carving out an essentialist position, there is a need "to do politics according to the old rules whilst remembering the dangers of this."<sup>11</sup> Tiongson seemingly has taken for granted these "dangers" encountered in essentialism. Also, Spivak explains that the construction of an essentialized narrative is temporal. The aim of strategic essentialism is to achieve certain goals against the hegemony of colonial and imperial forces. After which, the politicalization of differences is the appropriate step for the oppressed to be heard. This, however, has not manifested in Tiongson's declaration of national culture.

This provision of a seemingly homogenized Philippine theatre identity is the starting point of this essay. I wish to problematize and interrogate Tiongson's theoretical model grounded within David Martinez's critique against a homogenized Philippine nation (*sic*, culture).<sup>12</sup> Probably, Tiongson may have not realized that the Philippines as a nation is not composed of a singular culture. As David Martinez elicits – the center is not at all the representation of all Filipino cultures (regions of the Philippines) as implicitly manifested in Tiongson's essay.

This mode of representation and theorizing is not exclusively a Philippine theatre scholars' articulation. Pieces of literature on Asian theatre studies (or in a microcosm level – the Southeast Asian theatre scholarship) oftentimes invoke a direct opposition of the West and the East and that the East is a singular cultural entity. Most literature suggests that there is no difficulty in pointing out Asian theatre against the Western theatre because of some homogenized markers on the binaries.

The first part in this inquiry is a critique on the "Asian-ness" of Asian theatre. I interrogate the different concepts (like communal, tradition, ritual, spectacle, among others) invoked by most scholars in Asian theatre studies in this essentializing exercise. Afterwards, I discuss how Nicanor G. Tiongson engages in the same essentializing discourse. In the end, I argue that the discourse perhaps is not to look at the Asian-ness but the Asian-nesses of the so-called Asian theatre and / or the Philippine-nesses of Philippine theatre. Probably, the continuous theoretical discourse should not be a construction of an Asian theatre identity or in the case of the Philippines, the construction of a Philippine theatre identity but the

affirmation of Asian theatre identities or Philippine theatre identities in the case of the Philippines.

### **Foundations, Categories, and/or Conditions on the Asian-ness of Asian Theatre**

Steve Tillis critiques textbooks in theatre history particularly Leonard Pronko's *Theatre East and West*.<sup>13</sup> Tillis argues that for the longest time, scholars in theatre history have been utilizing Pronko's "East-West Approach Model." Tillis commences by critiquing the prime assumption of this model: that the East is a singular cultural entity. In a sense, it is suggested that all Asian countries share the same cultural experiences.<sup>14</sup>

This assumption is the same model used in the Asian theatre classes in the Philippines' premiere and national university, the University of the Philippines (UP). UP's Department of Speech Communication and Theatre Arts offers a bachelor's degree and a master's degree in theatre arts. Both programs offer theatre courses on Asian theatre. The course description for both courses is the identification of the dynamics of the "theatre" in Asia. These courses also suggest that Asia is a singular cultural entity. Implicitly, there is a suggestion that Asia has a specific theatre practice that is inherently and exclusively "Asian."

These courses however, do not include the theatre experiences in the Middle East whence these Arab nations are also located in this huge geographical landmass. These countries have theatrical traditions too: *ta'ziyeh* travelling troupes in Iraq, Bahrain, Southern Lebanon and Iran performed during the Muharram season of the Muslim calendar,<sup>15</sup> *kheimeh shab bazi* marionette puppet theatre in Iran,<sup>16</sup> or the *Karagoz* shadow puppet theatre in Turkey.<sup>17</sup> The most definite answer on why these theatre traditions are not included in the courses is always an issue of time. Usually, the limited 18-week class meetings are the culprits in this non-inclusion. Martin Manalansan, however, exposes that in US (particularly in New York), "Asian" as an identity marker has always been attributed to the East Asians (i.e. Chinese, Japanese, Koreans).<sup>18</sup> This may also be considered as a key factor on why the Arab countries are not discussed in many Asian theatre classes like those in U.P.<sup>19</sup> Tillis argues: "I do not, however, see that the Eurasian continent holds another distinct and coherent cultural entity to counterpose against the first one: in other words, I do not see a unified East. I see, rather, India, China, Japan, Islamicite, and so on – that is, a set of Asian cultures, each coherent and distinct, but not together a single entity."<sup>20</sup>

Tillis appears to be an antagonist in Asian theatre scholarship. The assertion of a unified and coherent Asia is always articulated in Asian theatre studies. Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio, for example, illustrates four major foundations (and conditions) for a theatrical tradition to be identified as Asian: (1) dedication, religious component, (2) material: improvisation and extension, (3) the use of total theatre, and (4) social, political, and educational components.<sup>21</sup> In her seminal

work, which is supposedly an introduction of Asian theatre to Filipino people, she argues that these characteristics apparently the peculiar qualities of Asian theatre as compared to the Western stage.

Religion is oftentimes the most asserted concept in illustrating the “Asian-ness” of Asian theatre. In Lapeña-Bonifacio, it is the most important condition. Religion is argued to be a dominant mediator of meaning and the foundation of theatre traditions in the region.<sup>22</sup> For instance, in the Philippines, a discussion of the passion-play *sinakulo*<sup>23</sup> or the colorful *komedya*<sup>24</sup> is also a discussion of Catholicism. William Peterson looks at the theatricality of Moriones Festival (which is also a *sinakulo* performance), a colorful masked festival in the Philippines through the juxtaposition of politics and Catholicism.<sup>25</sup> *Kabuki*<sup>26</sup>, *noh*<sup>27</sup>, and *bunraku*<sup>28</sup> in Japan are always linked to Shintoism and sometimes to Buddhism. The *wayang*<sup>29</sup> puppet traditions in Indonesia and even in Malaysia are always attributed to indigenous religions and sometimes to Hinduism. Indian theatre is always explained as a gift from the gods.<sup>30</sup> Scholars assert that, as in other art forms, theatre has been a means toward the syncretic adoption of competing dogmas. This is despite the fact that religious dictum often privileges convention over radical departures in form and improvisation.

But nonetheless, this is not exclusively an “Asian” encounter. Even in Europe and the United States, religion has always been implicated in their theatres. Besides, the historians of Western Theatre attribute prehistoric religious rituals as the origin of theatre. In the contemporary times, religion has also a huge impact in the discourse and even in the praxis of the theatres in the West. The *Comedia* in Spain, for example, is rooted in Catholicism. In a conference on the Philippine *komedya* in 2008, Gabino Ponce Herrero of Universidad de Alicante in Spain narrates how until today in a small village in Alicante, a yearly *comedia* theatre festival is held. He explains that the present day performances of the *comedia* in this village depict the historical conflict of the Hispanic Catholics and the Turkish Muslims. In Germany, Germans perform a passion play called *oberammergau* every ten years.<sup>31</sup> Years ago, Terence McNally’s “Corpus Christi” was staged Off-Broadway. The play is a fiction narrative suggesting the possibility that Jesus and John, the Beloved had an intimate relationship. It was a “queer” reading of Jesus’ relationship with his most beloved apostle. The play, when it opened on 13 October 1998 at the Manhattan Theatre Club (MTC) in New York, “it was denounced from local pulpits, picketed by religious demonstrators, and – in the face of anonymous telephone threats to burn down the theater, kill the staff and ‘exterminate’ the playwright (...).<sup>32</sup>

In relation to religion, Adolphe Scott, Lapeña-Bonifacio and Durga assert that “Ramayana” and “Mahabharata” are the centerpieces / foundations of the different theatrical traditions of Asia. Durga exclaims that these epics, particularly the “Ramayana” are integral parts of the colorful Asian theatre tradition. Most *wayang* performances took inspiration from these epics. In Bali, *wayang kulit parwa* and *wayang kulit Ramayana* are shadow-puppet traditions based on the Ramayana.

On the other hand, Rubin and Sedena explain that the *wayang kulit gambah* and *wayang kulit arja* are based on the Mahabharata. *Nang Yai*<sup>33</sup> in Thailand also had some performances borrowed from these epics. Dararai states that this shadow play performs mostly episodes from Ramayana, or the Ramakin epic in Thai as an allegory to the bravery and integrity of the king.<sup>34</sup> In the Philippines, there are some theatre performances based on and inspired by the epics. Bienvenido Lumbera's "Rama Hari" is a dance interpretation of the epics staged by Ballet Philippines at the Main Theatre of the Cultural Center of the Philippines. The ballet was later transformed into a mega-musical by Sari Kultur billed as "Rama at Sita," (Rama and Sita) staged at the 2,500 seat-auditorium of the University of the Philippines Main Theatre. In 2006, Teatro Mulat ng Pilipinas, a children's theatre company, transformed the Ramayana into "Papet Ramayana" (Puppet Ramayana) with a goal of introducing the epic to younger audiences especially since the epic is not popular to Filipino children until they more or less reach their tertiary years.

Nevertheless, to situate these epics as the centerpieces of Asian theatre is seemingly misleading. Take for example, the case of Japan where the influence of Hinduism (where these epics are based) is predominantly alien. *Beijing Opera*, a comprehensive performing art as it combines singing, recitation, acting and acrobatics (dancing), derives its texts from various Chinese folk narratives. Yi Bian explains that the narratives of *Beijing Opera* come from the improvisations using stock characters of folk literature.<sup>35</sup> *P'ansori*, a traditional Korean musical drama developed by professional folk musicians or *kwangdae* since the beginning of 18<sup>th</sup> century are products of improvisations. There are performers of *p'ansori* who devise their songs from community traditions.<sup>36</sup> The *ta'ziyeh* performances in the Middle East, states Beeman, are based on and inspired by the martyrdom of Imam Husain. As mentioned earlier, in the Philippines, the epics are not even popular to commoners. The multi-million pesos musical "Rama at Sita" did not make it in the box office. The marketing manager has to give free tickets around the university campus in order to fill the auditorium.

Going back to the four pillars of Asian theatre suggested by Lapeña-Bonifacio, there are many theatre traditions in Asia, which may face the dilemma of "othering" - - as non-Asian. The *Madang-guk* is Korea's people's theatre. There is nothing religious in it. Even the notion of improvisation is hardly utilized in this theatre form. Its forerunners wrote scripts with the intention of properly representing and appropriating the *minjung* (people). As a type of protest theatre, Namhee Lee explains that the forerunners of this postcolonial theatre form present the *minjung's* sense of nationalism.<sup>37</sup> Some pieces talk about anti-Japanese sentiments. Some satirize the current state of the society. Other pieces are parodies of the government. Even the Korean lyrical *p'ansori* may be disqualified in the list since only the character of improvisation categorizes it as Asian theatre.

The same is articulated when we talk about the Filipino-musical *sarsuwela*. In the souvenir program of the University of the Philippines Sarsuwela Festival 2009, Tiongson explains that the *sarsuwela* is usually written in prose, in one to five

acts, narrating the challenges of romantic engagements between idealized Filipino characters, and oftentimes interfused with social, political, economic and cultural issues contextualized within the historicity of the period when the play was written. Using the same assertions of Lapeña-Bonifacio, there is nothing Asian in this form since the performance does not use improvisations. It is not in any way connected to religion, albeit sometimes it criticizes religion. It is more political and social than religious as it was used to overthrow imperialism (Hispanic colonization, the American colonization and former Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos).

These general characteristics become more problematic when we look at intercultural theatre practices in the region. Although the idea of total theatre is performed in the *khatakali*, a codified dance-theatre from Kerala, South India, when used in an intercultural production billed as “*Khatakali King Lear*” staged at the Globe Theatre in London, nothing religious, improvisational, or a sense of dedication manifested in the performance.<sup>38</sup> When *Beijing Opera* was appropriated in a workshop in the United States, there was improvisation but religion did not in any way provoke the actors to continue the activity. The participants never engaged in any political and social commentary as they went along with their presentation.<sup>39</sup> Ninagawa Yukio’s intercultural Hamlet was a *shingeki* (modern theatre) performance. Although, Yukio borrowed from other Japanese forms like *kabuki* and *noh*, his objective was not primarily on spirituality and/or religiosity but more on entertainment.<sup>40</sup> Jon M. Brokering exposes how Ninagawa Yukio transcended cultural, linguistic and political borders but did not in any way attempt to transcend the audience members into a *communitas* as in a religious ritual.

### Asian Theatre: Other Recurring Concepts

Other concepts are also asserted to point significant markers of a homogenized Eastern theatre from a homogenized Western theatre. Community, ritual, and spectacle are usually the recurring concepts in Asian theatre studies. In relation, the notion of tradition is always used as a concept connecting these three. Tradition is always understood as the heritage of the past or the “relic” of the past. It is a favored concept because it provides a lens to rationalize some orientalizing and exoticizing gazes. Tradition is always argued to be synonymous with authenticity: the more traditional the performance is, the more authentic is its categorization. Craig Latrell associates authenticity with tradition as he critiques cultural village performances in Malaysia.<sup>41</sup> Latrell criticizes tourism industry as destroyers of traditions (therefore, authenticity). Catherine Diamond implicates community tradition as the centerpiece of Balinese gamelan performance in contrast to the performances in the West (Europe and US).<sup>42</sup> Andrew Killick, on the other hand, invents the category of the ‘traditionalesque’ as a term for modern day Korean performances combining “traditional” performances (i.e. *changgunguk*) and Western

dramaturgy to differentiate the authentic Korean performances from the hybridized (or inauthentic) performances.<sup>43</sup>

Other scholars argue how traditions are used (and exploited) in many intercultural theatre performances staged mostly in the West.<sup>44</sup> This exploitation is often blamed on capitalism and tourism (or generally the economic impulse of globalization) like the discussion of Bharucha, Diamond, Peterson, and Latrell. In most instances, tradition is contrasted with the concept of the “present” framed within the Western imagination – technology, globalization, the staged pieces, texts (or written scripts), etc. It never occurred in Asian theatre literature that tradition does not only refer to the past or the “relic” of ancient past. Dan Ben Amos argues, “tradition is artistic communication in small groups.”<sup>45</sup> If this is so, even Broadway in New York and West End in London are traditions. Not to mention, the concept of the “modern” is also tradition.

In contrast, the concept of modern is always equivalent or synonymous with development. Arguably, the thesis ‘tradition is to the East and the modern is to the West’ has always been the favorable starting point of theatre discourse in literature. It has always been the case in scholarship that the more traditional the performance is, the more it is worthy of examination. Hence, another form of “othering” may be inferred. In the Philippines, for example, commercial-professional theatre companies like Repertory Philippines, New Voice Company and Atlantis Productions do not produce “traditional” theatre forms like the *komedyang sarsuwela* or the *sinakulo*. These companies usually stage the “modern” type of theatre as introduced by its colonizers, the globalized world, and through its external relations with the Western world. Mega-musicals like Claude Michel-Schonberg’s *Les Miserables* and Andrew Lloyd Webber – Tim Rice’s *Evita* (both produced by Repertory Philippines), Jonathan Larson’s *Rent* and Duncan Sheik’s musical adaptation of Wedekind’s *Spring Awakening* (produced by Atlantis Productions), Stephen Sondheim’s *Into the Woods* and Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *Aspects of Love* (produced by New Voice Company) or straight plays like Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* or Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues* (presented by New Voice Company) are the usual productions of these companies. Other theatre companies like Dulaang UP, Tanghalang Pilipino and Philippine Educational Theatre Association spend time contemporizing traditional theatre forms. However, directors of these companies are ambivalent to call their productions traditional theatres. Instead, they justify their productions as experiments, alternatives, or sometimes intercultural. As a manifestation of this “othering,” no literature yet has been written about the dynamics of these commercial / professional theatres. Scholarship on Philippine theatre is always about the traditional forms. I suspect the reason behind this lies in the fact that the most celebrated and the most recognized scholarships are the discussions and discourses of traditional theatre forms.

Other countries outside Asia also have rituals, spectacles, and traditions crafted by various communities yet they are not talked about or thought of as

theatres (though perceived as “one of a kind” too). For example, in South America, particularly in the northern region of Potosi in Bolivia, community members perform the religious ritual of the *tinku*. In this ritual, participants bash each other with a prime purpose of purging blood as a symbol for the fertility of the land. This ritual, I suspect, is not perceived as theatre because of its geographical situatedness. Perhaps, if *tinku* is performed in Asia, scholars might talk about it as theatre.

In addition, Scott is convinced that to locate the centerpiece of Asian theatre is a dead-end activity. Ironically, he suggests “[t]wo seminal influences in Asian theatre growth have been the story teller and the puppet show. The combination of their methods has provided invention for acting methods. The story teller was one of the first professional entertainers and he has carried on his calling with constantly renewed vigour through-out all Asia.”<sup>46</sup> In other words, Scott implies that to understand the Asian-ness of Asian theatre, we should instead be talking about influences and origin: puppetry and story-telling. However, puppet tradition is not predominantly Asian and it is not to be found in all Asian countries. There is puppet tradition in Europe and in United States – the marionettes, the ventriloquist, etc. The Philippines does not have a clear puppet tradition. Most middle-eastern countries do not have a distinct puppet tradition. *Bunraku* puppet tradition in Japan came later after the *kabuki* and the *noh*.<sup>47</sup>

Asia is probably just a geographic marker. This probably the reason behind the difficulty in pinpointing the Asian in Asia. In the Filipino experience, Nick Joaquin, national artist for literature claims that there is nothing ‘Asian’ in the Filipino people to begin with, except for the fact that these people are in Asia.<sup>48</sup> Reiterating Joaquin, maybe there is nothing Asian in these Asian performances except for the fact that all of them are performed in this huge landmass which we now call Asia.

### **A Critique on the Philippine-ness of Philippine Theatre**

As an extension of this query, Philippine theatre studies also falls into this mode of discourse particularly the kind of theorizing proposed by Nicanor G. Tiongson. As mentioned earlier, Tiongson begins this modular inquiry as if Philippine culture is a homogenous entity in the same way Asia is perceived as a singular cultural entity. Tiongson’s take-off towards defining Philippine-ness of Philippine theatre and drama begins by posing what he calls a problem in Philippine theatre scholarship. According to him, the evolution of the concepts of drama and theatre (in the Philippines) are so “obviously shaped by the evolution of European and American drama” and that “it is clear that the use of these concepts can only be prejudicial to the study of Philippine, even Asian, drama”<sup>49</sup> This is followed by his proposed solution: “to avoid “polluted” theories of theatre in our time, and search for the soul that gives life to drama, wherever one may find it, in whatever form one may chance upon it.”<sup>50</sup> Tiongson explicitly claims that scholars should at once dismiss lessons learned from American and European dramaturgies. In short, he is

implicating that theories in Philippine theatre and drama are “polluted” because scholars have been trying to understand them through the American and European lenses. This is what I call the nativity of Philippine theatre(s).

Like in the case of identifying the Asian-ness in Asian theatre, the notion of culture in Tiongson is frozen, static and deterministic. Jazmin Llana attests that cultural identity is such a difficult concept because it is never fixed. It is always performed and therefore constantly being reconfigured, constantly created and forever disappearing.<sup>51</sup> Fenella Cannell asserts that the Philippines is in constant and continuous negotiation with so many traditions including that of the so called pre-colonial and colonial.<sup>52</sup> It is therefore within this frame that a total nativist perspective is irrelevant at all. It must not be forgotten that this country is composed of several “nations.” In Martinez’ stance, borrowing Benedict Anderson’ “imagined community,” a nation is “a significant number of people bound by a distinct ancestry, culture, history and language. (...) Absent one of these essentials it’s immensely difficult to imagine that a nation exists.”<sup>53</sup> It maybe inferred that Martinez suggests that since the country has several nations, each of these nations has her own specific imagined cultures.

The Philippines is not only an amalgamation of pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial cultures. It is also made up of several cultural traditions, in which none appears to be at the center. The material culture of the Filipino people varies depending on which region a Filipino individual belongs. This is strongly manifested in metaphysical culture as material culture somehow works symbiotically with the metaphysical realm. The lowland Christians for example do not have *halal*. The Muslim communities do not have Christmas.

Even Catholicism, which is strongly implicated as the foundation of Philippine theatre in Tiongson’s articulation, varies depending on which community a Filipino Catholic belongs. Catholicism in the Philippines is filled with colorful performativities and theatricalities. In Cutud, Pampanga, the Catholics’ most important devotional and sacrificial performance is the crucifixion ritual. In another essay, I asserted that the cross in this Catholic community is an essential material culture in the joint-performance of a passion play written by Ricardo Navarro in the 1950’s and the nailing ritual. The cross is also a symbolic icon, which takes part of the community’s metaphysical realm.<sup>54</sup> In Marinduque, the Catholics in this community perform the *moriones* ritual-festival-theatre. Wood-carved masks are like the cross in Cutud. Catholics in this small community, narrates Peterson, would never pursue the performance of this ritual-festival-theatre without these masks. These masks, like the cross in Cutud, have become part of the Catholics in Marinduque’s metaphysical realm.

In August 2009, Tanghalang Pilipino, the official performing arts group for theatre of the Cultural Center of the Philippines staged an adaptation of Bertolt Brecht’s “Mother Courage and Her Children.” Entitled *Madonna Brava ng Mindanao* (Madonna Brava of Mindanao), the adaptation presented the Muslim traditions and cultures in the Southern Philippines. The Philippines is the only country in

Southeast Asia dominated by Catholicism. Northern (Luzon) and Central (Visayas) Philippines are predominantly Catholics. Using Tiongson's assertions, Tanghalang Pilipino's presentation of this Brechtian adaptation may not be considered part of the Philippine theatre. The performance did not depict the dominant group. Also, engaging with Tiongson's theses, this adaptation did not address the needs of the many (which in the case of the Philippines, the Catholics) because it is a representation of the Muslim communities in Mindanao, considered one of the few 'minorities' in the country.

In another essay, I critique the assertion of *komedya*, as a national theatre form.<sup>55</sup> I argue that it cannot serve as national theatre because it is Tagalog and its orientation is leaning towards Catholicism. Although the Philippines is dominated by Catholics, it is not exclusively a Catholic nation. It is therefore in this stance that *komedya*, following Tiongson's essentializing theses, only reflects the culture of the Tagalogs and more so the culture of the Catholics. Although the Hispanic *comedia* was also introduced in other parts of the Philippines, the localization of this Hispanic form did not undergo the same process as that of the Tagalog people. This is the reason why *comedia* in Nueva Ecija became *arauqio*, in Cebu it became *linambay*, etc. *Komedya* is known by several names in other regions. But is the experience of the *komedya* the same with the experience of the *linambay* in the Visayas, or the *kuraldal* in Pampanga, or *arauqio* in Nueva Ecija?

Martinez has been very vocal about the critique on the center. Like Martinez, I argue that this assertion of an "essentialized" Philippine theatre is a form of manipulation by a central force (i.e. the government and academic institution). As a manipulation, there seems to be an act of "othering," or disowning some other performative practices by other Filipino communities. For instance, several commercial / professional theatre companies, which I mentioned earlier are not included in the discourse of Philippine-ness because most of these companies stage productions in English and / or borrowed productions from the Western stage like Shakespeare, Broadway and West-End musicals, Greek classics, to name a few. Even in Philippine theatre history these companies are not given a chance to veto their narratives. Doreen Fernandez' lexical *Palabas: Essays on Philippine Theatre History*, made mentioned of Repertory Philippines in the appendix only as one of the theatre companies established during the 1960's as if it did not contribute to the wealth of Philippine theatre practice. Tiongson did not mention any of these companies.

These theatre experiences are all partaking in the dynamism of a very specific urban culture – the Greater Manila Area. Probably, these scholars have been trapped in the binary of the urban and the town (or rural) and always situate the town as the native and the indigenous. There is this implicit tone that there is nothing native in urban culture, therefore, nothing Filipino. Citing Lila Abu-Lughod, Patrick Alcedo argues, we should always be critical against culture – against the homogenizing discourse of culture.<sup>56</sup> Although, the urban centers are seemingly Westernized (i.e. theatre practices), let us not forget that the process of

Westernization does not involve, “simply the imposition of Western culture onto local traditions but, rather highly variable process of local reinterpretation and contestation.”<sup>57</sup> There is this continuous culture-making but not a definite harmonious and orderly as if the locals are passive acceptors. Take for example, Catholicism, which is always favored by scholars as another foundation in the Philippines-ness of Philippine theatre. Catholicism is stronger in some provincial-town-lives. This may be the reason behind favoring the town over the city. Let us not have forgotten, Catholicism was also Western. Yet, it underwent a process of local reinterpretation and contestation which these cultures have made “Christianity part of their culture.”<sup>58</sup> In another essay, I argued that the development and appropriation of two Kapampangan cultural spectacles experienced ruptures and irregularities in the process. The same must be underscored in the discourse of Philippine theatre. There is no need to divide the town and the city. Above all, there is no need to essentialize the narratives of Philippine theatre because just like Catholicism elsewhere, it is always a theatre or theatres of the particulars.

### **Postscript: Asian-nesses, not Asian-ness; Philippine-nesses, not Philippine-ness**

Centuries of scholarship and research on the theatres in Asia (or in the Philippines) continue to be hounded by questions on which cultures originated particular genres, the centrality of performance versus the literary text and a sense of ambivalence over the need to return to traditional forms against the push toward change and radical experimentation. I am more ambivalent with the use of Asian Theatre or in the case of the Philippines, the Philippine Theatre. The discourse perhaps is not to look at the Asian-ness but the Asian-nesses. In the case of the Philippines, it should not be a search for the Philippine-ness but the Philippine-nesses. Probably, the continuous theoretical discourse is not a construction of Asian theatre identity or the reconstruction of Asian theatre identity but the affirmation of Asian theatre identities. As in the case of the Philippines, I also suggest that the continuous theoretical discourse must not be based on a construction of a Philippine theatre identity or the reconstruction of a Philippine theatre identity but the affirmation of Philippine theatre identities. As language appears to be political, “Theatres in Asia,” I guess is more apt in the nature of this discourse or the “theatres in the Philippines” in the case of the Philippines.

### **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this essay received the University of the Philippines Foundation Professorial Chair Fellowship in 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Nicanor G. Tiongson, "What is Philippine Drama?," Priscelina P. Legasto ed., *A Filipiniana Reader*, (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Open University Press), pp. 1 -20.

<sup>3</sup> When I was a graduate student at the University of the Philippines, Panitikan ng Pilipinas (Philippine Literature) 261: Dula ng Pilipinas (Philippine Drama) was a compulsory module. In this module, students are first introduced to Philippine drama and theatre through Tiongson's article. Theatre and literary scholars on Philippine theatre like Catherine Diamond, Eugene Van Erven, Doreen Fernandez, Virgilio S. Almario, to name a few directly and indirectly take Tiongson's position as the general condition of theatre in the Philippines.

<sup>4</sup> Tiongson, *What is Philippine Drama?*, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Catherine Diamond, "The Quest for the Elusive Self: The Role of Contemporary Philippine Theatre in the Formation of Cultural Identity," *TDR: The Drama Review*, Vol. 40. No. 1, (1996), p. 146.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> The keynote speech, titled "The Philippine Komedy: History, Indigenization, Revitalization" is subsequently published in the special issue on *komedy* and *sarsuwela* of the Philippine Humanities Review (2009 / 2010). Alongside this paper is Virgilio S. Almario's "Tungo sa Pagbuo ng Pambansang Dulaan" (Towards the Establishment of a National Theatre). Almario cites Tiongson in advocating for the Philippine government to institutionalize *komedy* as national theatre form. Tiongson shares the same sentiments with Almario regarding *komedy* as a cultural product that is inherently indicative of the Philippine national culture and Philippine national identity.

<sup>11</sup> Jazmin Badong Llana, "The Bicol Dotoc: Performance, Postcoloniality, and Pilgrimage," Unpublished Ph. D. Thesis (2010), Aberystwyth University, p. 188.

<sup>12</sup> David Martinez, *A Country of Our Own: Partitioning the Philippines*, (California: Asin Press, 2004).

<sup>13</sup> Steve Tillis, "East, West and World Theatre," *Asian Theatre Journal*, Vol. 20. No. 1 (2003), pp. 71 - 87.

<sup>14</sup> Although Tillis critiques this Asian-ness in Asian Theatre, he does not in any way critique the Southeast Asian-ness asserted in Southeast Asian theatre. As a matter of fact, he singularly ascribes theatres in Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, Philippines, Brunei, Laos, Burma, Singapore as Southeast Asian theatre.

<sup>15</sup> *Taziyeh* or *shabih* literally means religious epic theatre. It is performed in areas of the Middle East with large Shi'a populations: Iran, Iraq, Southern Lebanon and Bahrain. Also, this processional form of theatre is performed in some parts of India, Pakistan and even places far removed from Asia where Shi'a Muslim populations exist, such as Jamaica. The most elaborate, full-blown dramatic performances of *ta'ziyeh* continue to be performed in Iran. William Beeman explains that *ta'ziyeh* performances may be long or short, but they often take place all day, particularly on the ninth and tenth days of the Islamic month of Muharram, called *Tasuâ* and *Âshurâ* respectively, the latter being the day of the martyrdom of Imam Husain. Shi'a Muslims do not necessarily perceive *ta'ziyeh* as a theatre / entertainment but as a ritual of mourning. However, this form has several conventions. Beeman explicates "that the players do not, by convention, memorize their roles (though many have memorized them through years of repetition); rather, they read them from strips

of paper held in their hands called *tumâr*. The parts are not welded together in a common script, but are maintained as separate scripts with cue lines for each role, akin to "sides" used in Western theatre." Conventionally, the 'good' characters, on the side of Imam Husain chant their lines in classical Persian musical modes, and wear green tunics. The 'bad' characters declaim their lines in stentorian tones and wear red tunics. Men usually take over women's roles, who wear black, and cover their faces with veil. The performances offer a number of roles for children, played by young boys, who are also dressed in black, but are unveiled, whether they portray male or female characters. For full discussion of the theatricality of *taziye*, see William O. Beeman <http://www.asiasociety.org/arts-culture/performing-arts/theater/taziye-performance-conventions-a-short-sketch>, Accessed 20 August 2009.

<sup>16</sup> *Kheimeh Shab Bazi* is a traditional string puppet theatre in Iran. *Kheimeh* literally means 'booth' or 'box.' *Shab* means 'nighttime' or 'evening.' *Bazi* means 'puppet' and sometimes loosely translated as 'play.' *Kheimeh Shab Bazi* is literally translated as 'the nighttime or evening performance in a puppet booth or box.' This stringed puppet tradition is believed to have its origin in the 17<sup>th</sup> century probably influenced by Indian and Mongolian traders and travelling troupes. For more information on this Iranian puppet tradition, see Shiva Massoudi, "Kheimeh Shab Bazi: Iranian Traditional Marionette Theatre," *Asian Theatre Journal*, Vol. 26. No. 2. (2009), 260 - 280.

<sup>17</sup> *Karagoz* is a shadow puppet theatre in the Asian (Muslim) region of Turkey. *Karagoz* is the name of the stock hero of this puppet tradition. Usually, this comical puppet tradition is improvised from local scenes (satires of local issues). Performances are mostly confined to the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. For details on this puppet theatre see Adolphe C. Scott, *The Theatre in Asia*, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company Inc., 1972).

<sup>18</sup> Martin Manalansan IV, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora*, (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> Many theatre programs in the international academia identify Asian Theatre as the performance traditions in East Asia, Southeast Asia and India. For example, the Asian Theatre Graduate Program of the University of Hawaii (see <http://hawaii.edu/theatre/futurestudent/asian.php>, Accessed 10 October 2011) include Japanese Theatre, Chinese Theatre and Southeast Asian Theatre as the areas of specialization of the program. In the Theatre Studies undergraduate program of the National University of Singapore, the program offers two modules or courses on Asian Theatre (TS 2232: Introduction to Asian Theatre and TS 3239: Classical Asian Dramatic Texts) where the primary focus of both modules are the East Asian Theatre (in particular China and Japan), Southeast Asian Theatre (in particular Indonesia) and South Asian Theatre (in particular India) (see [http://www.fas.nus.edu.sg/ell/undergrad3\\_4.htm](http://www.fas.nus.edu.sg/ell/undergrad3_4.htm), Accessed 10 October 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Tillis, p. 73.

<sup>21</sup> Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio, *Introduction to the Theatre of Asia for the Filipino*, (Quezon City: University of the Philippines - National Science Development Board Research Project), p. vii.

<sup>22</sup> There are other studies that directly or indirectly agree with Lapeña-Bonifacio regarding religion as an important foundation in the Asian-ness of Asian Theatre: Nicanor G. Tiongson, *Sinakulo: Philippine History and Anthology Volume 1*, (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1999a); Nicanor G. Tiongson, *Komedya: Philippine History and Anthology Volume 2*, (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1999b); Marzana Poplawska, "Wayang Wahyu as an Example of Christian Forms of Shadow Theatre" *Asian Theatre*

*Journal*, Vol. 21. No. 2. (2004), pp. 194 – 202; William Peterson, “Holy Week in the “Heart of the Philippines”: Spirituality, Theatre, and Community in Marinduque’s Moriones Festival,” *Asian Theatre Journal* Vol. 24. No. 2 (2007), 309 – 337; Suk-Young Kim, “Gulag, the Musical: Performing Trauma in North Korea through Yoduk Story” *TDR: The Drama Review*, Vol. 52. No. 1. (2008), pp. 118 – 135; Sir Anril Pineda Tiatco and Amihan Bonifacio-Ramolete, “Cutud’s Ritual of Nailing on the Cross: Performance of Pain and Suffering,” *Asian Theatre Journal*, Vol. 25. No. 1. (2008), 58 – 76; Evan Darwin Winet, “Between Umat and Rakyat: Islam and Nationalism in Indonesian Modern Theatre,” *Theatre Journal* Vol. 63 (2009), 43 – 69.

<sup>23</sup> *Sinakulo* is a traditional Philippine religious theatre form whose origin is attributed to the lyrical narrative on the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus called the *pabasa*. Like the *pabasa*, the *sinakulo* is usually performed in Catholic communities in the Philippines during their Holy Week celebration (usually between March and April). For discussions of the *sinakulo* see Doreen G. Fernandez, *Palabas: Essays on Philippine Theatre History* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1996); Nicanor G. Tiongson, *Sinakulo* (1999a); Sir Anril Pineda Tiatco and Amihan Bonifacio-Ramolete (2008).

<sup>24</sup> *Komedya* is a Philippine traditional theatre form whose plots revolve around the social, political, and religious conflicts between the Muslims and Christians (Catholics). It was introduced in the Philippines by the Spaniards during the inquisition. Usually, presented during religious fiestas with the support of the Catholic community members. For more information on this Philippine traditional theatre form see Doreen G. Fernandez (1996); Tiongson (1999b); Sir Anril Pineda Tiatco, “Postscript to University of the Philippines Komedya Fiesta 2008: Prelude to a Discourse on National Theatre,” *Asian Theatre Journal*, Vol. 26. No. 2. (2009), pp. 281 - 302.

<sup>25</sup> Peterson, “Holy Week in the “Heart of the Philippines”” (2007).

<sup>26</sup> *Kabuki* is Japan’s traditional form of popular theatre which began at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and soon became the most successful theatre entertainment in the red districts of the great cities. For a detailed discussion see Benito Orani, *The Japanese Theatre: From Shamanistic Ritual to Contemporary Pluralism*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990). There are two important components in this theatre form: the actor is the principal means of expression; the stage and the *hanamichi* are platforms for acting rather than representational areas. For a discussion on these components, see Earle Ernst, *The Kabuki Theatre*, (Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press, 1974).

<sup>27</sup> *Noh* is a genre of dance theatre in Japan developed within the *Sarugaku* tradition by Kan’ami and Zeami in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. *Noh* literally means skill or talent. For a detailed discussion see Orani (1990).

<sup>28</sup> *Bunraku* is Japan’s puppet tradition emerged during the 18<sup>th</sup> century named after the puppeteer Uemura Burakuken. In former times, *bunraku* was known as *yoruri*. For more information on the *bunraku*, see Orani (1990).

<sup>29</sup> *Wayang* theatre developed several genres thru time. The most popular of all these genres is the *wayang kulit* or shadow-puppet theatre. For discussions on this puppet theatre, see Leon Rubin and I Nyoman Sedena, *Performances in Bali* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>30</sup> S.A.K. Durga, “Ramayana Theatre in India and Southeast Asia,” Unpublished lecture delivered during the Southeast Asian Emporium in Vietnam (2008).

<sup>31</sup> See Oberamergau, <http://www.passionplay-oberammergau.com>, Accessed 15 December 2010.

<sup>32</sup> Raymond-Jean Frontain, "McNally After the 'Gay Jesus' Play," *Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide*, Vol. 14. No. 2. (2007), p. 21.

<sup>33</sup> *Nang Yai* in Thai is translated as big hides. This shadow-puppet tradition uses colorful leather puppets sometimes reaching a height of two meters. This theatre tradition is considered to be the oldest form of theatrical arts in Thailand tracing back to the reign of King U-Thong (1350 – 1369).

<sup>34</sup> Dararai, "Nang Yai Shadow Play at Wat Khanon," *Thaiways Magazine*, [http://www.thaiwaysmagazine.com/thai\\_article/2410\\_nang\\_yai\\_yai.html](http://www.thaiwaysmagazine.com/thai_article/2410_nang_yai_yai.html), Accessed 20 September 2009.

<sup>35</sup> Yi Bian, *The Realm of Chinese Culture: Peking Opera*, (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 2005).

<sup>36</sup> For more information on the *p'ansori*, see Hae-Kyung Um, "New P'ansori in Twenty First Century Korea: Creative Dialectics of Tradition and Modernity," *Asian Theatre Journal*, Vol. 25. No. 1 (2008), pp 24 – 57.

<sup>37</sup> Namhee Lee, "Between Indeterminacy and Radical Critique: Madang-guk Ritual and Protest," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* Vol. 11. No. 3. (2003), pp. 555 – 584.

<sup>38</sup> See the discussion of Dianne Daugerty, "The Pendulum of Intercultural Performance: Kathakali King Lear at Shakespeare's Globe" *Asian Theatre Journal* Vol. 22. No. 1. (2005), pp. 52 – 72.

<sup>39</sup> See the discussion of Faye Chunfang Fei and William Huizhui Sun, "Othello and Beijing Opera: Appropriation as a Two Way Street," *TDR: The Drama Review*, Vol. 50. No. 1. (2006), pp. 120 – 133.

<sup>40</sup> See the discussion of Jon M. Bockering, "Ninagawa Yukio's Intercultural Hamlet: Parsing Japanese Iconography," *Asian Theatre Journal*, Vol. 24. No. 2. (2007), pp. 370 – 396.

<sup>41</sup> Craig T. Latrell, "Exotic Dancing: Performing Tribal and Regional Identities in East Malaysia's Cultural Villages," *TDR: The Drama Review*, Vol. 52. No. 4., (2008), pp. 41 – 63.

<sup>42</sup> Catherine Diamond, "Fire in the Banana's Belly: Bali's Female Performers Essay the Masculine Arts," *Asian Theatre Journal*, Vol. 25 No. 2. (2008), pp. 231 – 271.

<sup>43</sup> Andrew Killick, "Ch'angguk Opera and the Category of the Traditionalesque," *Korean Studies*, Vol. 25. No. 1. (2001), pp. 51 – 71.

<sup>44</sup> For more information on intercultural theatre practice vis-à-vis issues on Western modernity, globalization and exploitation, see Rustom Bharucha, *The Politics of Cultural Practice: Thinking Through Theatre in the Age of Globalization*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>45</sup> Simon J. Bronner, "The Meaning of Traditions: An Introduction," *Western Folklore*, Vol. 59. No. 2. (2000), p. 90.

<sup>46</sup> Adolphe C. Scott, p. 9.

<sup>47</sup> Orani (1990).

<sup>48</sup> Nick Joaquin, *Culture and History*, (Pasig City: Anvil Publishing House, 2004).

<sup>49</sup> Nicanor G. Tiongson, "What is Philippine Drama?," p. 1.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Jazmine Badong Llana, "Asian Embodiment and Postcolonial Performance in the Bikol Dotoc," paper presented at the 51<sup>st</sup> International Federation for Theatre Research Conference, 14 – 19 July 2008, Seoul, South Korea.

<sup>52</sup> Fenella Cannell, *Power and Intimacy in the Christian Philippines*, (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2006).

<sup>53</sup> David Martinez, *A Country of our Own*, p. 33.

<sup>54</sup> Sir Anril Pineda Tiatco, "Libad nang Apung Iru and Pamamku King Krus: Performance of Ambivalence in Kapampangan Cultural Spectacles," *TDR: The Drama Review*, Vol. 54. No. 2. (2010), 91 – 102.

<sup>55</sup> Sir Anril Pineda Tiatco, "Postscript to University of the Philippines Komedy Fiesta 2008."

<sup>56</sup> Patrick Alcedo, "Sacred Camp: Transgendering Faith in a Philippine Festival," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 38. No. 1. (2007), pp. 107 – 132.

<sup>57</sup> Harvey Whitefield, "Appropriated and Monolithic Christianity in Malenesia" Fenella Cannell ed., (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 295.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 296.

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