



Construction of Identity in Central Panay: A Critical Examination of the Ethnographic Subject in the Works of Jocano and Magos

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the works of F. Landa Jocano and Alicia P. Magos to expose how they constructed the identity of the indigenous people of Central Panay. Landa Jocano's ethnographic strategy privileged the kinship system as a heuristic device and overestimated its import as a construct. Magos conflated the epics of Central Panay with the world of practical realities out of which these epics originated. Both succumbed to the unreflexive and naïve procedure and standpoint of ethnographic realism. On this account, their ethnography can more easily legitimize the powerful and unjust political forces in our society.

The reason for my particular fascination in doing a critical examination of F. Landa Jocano's and Alicia Magos' ethnographic representations is that like both of them, I also hail from Panay Island. I am interested in the indigenous people of our island but, ultimately, a shared rootedness is our common starting point. My exposure to critical theory and deconstruction has led me to interrogate the anthropological submissions of these two established scholars. I hope that this critical stand will result in a clearer understanding of the issues of indigeneity raised in this paper.

This paper follows the following sequence, first, I describe the indigenous people of Panay by exemplifying the fate of the nationally recognized chanter Elena Gardoce Francisco; second, I critique Jocano's overemphasis of kinship as a heuristic devise; third, I expose Magos' flawed representation where she collapsed the world of the epics with the world of practical realities; and, lastly, I interrogate these two ethnographers' textual realism as an inadequate procedure to account for a complex and complicated anthropological reality.

Tumandok of Central Panay

Last May 31, 2004, the more than 100 year-old chanter of *sugidanons* (epics) named Elena Gardoce Francisco died. For her kin in Sitio Carvasana, Barangay Mabini, in the town of Tapaz, Capiz, this 1992 Philippine Cultural Center awardee in the field of oral literature has just started her expected journey to the abode of their ancestral spirits located somewhere in the headwaters of Pan-ay, Halawod and Aklan rivers. The members of her extended family understand that when their time comes, they too will travel the same path. The pregnant women of her community and neighboring villages admitted that they will miss her healing powers as their *hilot* (local midwife) when they give birth. Lola Elena, considered by many as the most skillful and reliable *hilot* around, had assisted the birthing of almost all babies in Sitio Carvasana in earlier days. As importantly, her death has seriously diminished the number of epic chanters in central Panay.

The brave and determined Lola Elena, a greatly respected person in her locality, sometime in the middle of August 2002 was carried by her son all the way from her mountain village to Iloilo City. On her arrival in Iloilo City, Lola Elena confronted the civilian and military authorities to demand that the "military should stay away from [their] homes, farms and ancestral land" (see References, "Epic chanter ask army to leave ancestral land"). On many previous instances starting in 1978, from 1992 until 1996, and lately in 2001, a considerable number of her people had

experienced violations of their individual and community rights in the hands of the military and civilian authorities (Task Force Tumandok, 2002). Lola Elena complained about the forced recruitment of men to government militias, the enforcement of curfew and the destruction of their crops by the Philippine Army (Third Infantry Division at Camp Macario Peralta) stationed in their settlement (Burgos, 2002: p.1). It is highly unjust that Lola Elena's co-villagers and other indigenous inhabitants are presently struggling to survive in their own ancestral lands (Burgos: 2003: A16; Burgos, 2005: p. A17; Task Force Tumandok, 2002; Tejero, 2002).

Lola Elena and her people are called by various names. Prof. Landa Jocano referred to them as the Sulod (1968; 2000) while Dr. Magos, who used the big river system of the island as the reference for their identity, prefers the hyphenated term Pan-aynon-Bukidnon or Halawodnon-Bukidnon (Magos, 1999), with the word Bukidnon (literally, from the mountains) serving as generic qualifier possibly to neutralize its popular derogatory appellation. Presently, in the context of their active participation in various campaigns to reclaim their ancestral land, Lola Elena's people refer to themselves as *Tumandok* (literally, native of the place). In 1996, the residents of 16 Barangays (villages) of Capiz established an organization called TUMANDOK (*Tumandok nga mga Mangunguma nga Nagapangapin sa Duta kag Kabuhi*, Native Tillers who Defend their Land and Life) to defend their rights as indigenous tillers of their ancestral lands. In December 28, 2002, they founded a multi-purpose center in Tapaz, Capiz mandated to respond to their pressing problems. While academics like Jocano and Magos continue to employ the earlier nomenclature, the word *Tumandok* has gained currency in usage among indigenous peoples of central Panay and among local media practitioners in Iloilo City.

In order that my critical comments on the works of Landa Jocano and Magos are consistent with the terms that each has used to name the indigenous people of central Panay, I opted to follow their lead and usage throughout this essay. Where appropriate, I also use the terms Sulodnons and Bukidnons to refer to these indigenous people. I deliberately avoid using *Tumandok*, although this is my preferred term, in order to avoid

possible confusion. The principal concern of this essay is not to quibble with the appropriateness of names but to critique the ethnographic presentation of these people by the two leading scholars. I will begin my critical examination with Landa Jocano's famous monograph published by the University of the Philippines Press in 1968.

F. Landa Jocano's Sulod Society

Writing in the foreword of Landa Jocano's *Sulod Society* (1968), the renowned anthropologist Robert B. Fox praised the monograph because it "achieves a depth of description and insight, as well as analysis, which allows the Sulod to be real; not simply actors in an intellectual exercise" (Jocano, 1968: p. viii). The young Ilonggo anthropologist, whose academic career at that time was being established, was commended to have done 'a unique study by an "inside observer" who maintains an "outside objectivity"' (Ibid). Fox's laudatory words were likely inspired by the recognition given to Landa Jocano when he obtained the Roy D. Albert Award in Anthropology at the University of Chicago in 1962.

If we want to understand how Landa Jocano established the ethnic identity of a people in Panay as the subject matter of his ethnography or, in other words, how he constructed his ethnographic subject, the critical task requires a close reading of his *Sulod Society* monograph. According to him, to comprehend the dynamics and group identity of the Sulod people, their kinship system occupies the central, controlling and explanatory position. The central question in Jocano's study concerning social equilibrium, ceremonial life and rituals related to the cult of ancestors gravitate around an understanding of their kinship system (Jocano, 1968: 3). Unraveling the bilateral descent system based on consanguinity, affinity and ritual associations among Sulod people is, for Jocano, equivalent to answering the questions about their ethnic identity.

In this paper I argue that for Jocano the kinship system acts a lens through which the anthropologist perceives his ethnographic subjects. In his study he informs us that "...kinship categories are not merely abstractions

in the mind of anthropologists but ... they have an empirical reality in the form of definite arrangements of people in society," (1968: 272). Jocano further asserts; "[i]t must be pointed out that the concept of blood relationship is **pervasive and omnipresent** in the Sulod lifeways, and any outsider who wants to identify himself with the group has to establish relationship either by marriage or ritual kinship..." (p.79, underscoring supplied). Although the kinship system does not exist out there as a distinguishable entity independent from the observer, an anthropologist like Jocano privileges it as such in order to justify the status of his favorite arguments.

At this stage I would like to point out that other eminent sociologists and anthropologists of this generation often unsuspectingly, similarly objectified conceptual and analytical orthodoxies. The influence A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1950; 1952), a leading social anthropologist may have been responsible for Jocano's fascination with kinship. This theoretical orientation was a major direction in ethnographic work at that time. Characteristically, Jocano asserts, "...it is the kind of relations obtaining between the members of the Sulod family that holds the key to our understanding of the patterned and repetitive forms of acting, thinking, and feeling among the members of the Sulod community" (1968: 101-102). Let me be clear, however, that this is no case of intellectual slackness, neither is it an instance of sleigh of hand in argumentation. This appears to me as a matter of gratuitous accentuation, an unnecessary privileging of a construct, an overrating of a heuristic devise in certain schools of Sociology and Anthropology. In the Sulod monograph, the kinship system is the apple of Jocano's structural-functionalist eyes, to modify the idiomatic expression.

In the eyes of a Chicago-trained anthropologist like Jocano, the kinship system is a unique, cohering and centripetal force that cements Sulod society. Such a society is described by him to be on the whole a well-functioning, stable and relatively isolated social totality. "Moreover the relative isolation of the [Sulod] people," Jocano happily reports, "from the other inhabitants of Panay Islands...offers an excellent opportunity

for a more rigorous and scientific control over observation and analysis of cultural phenomena” (1968: 5). Almost uncontaminated by outside influences, Sulod society for Jocano meets the strict criteria of a structural-functionalist model.

However, if for Jocano, “[i]t can be said for Sulod, [that] kinship is an important integrative force in their society” (1968: 284) an assertion that is defensible, there are ample examples of fissures, schisms and ruptures in the monograph which undermine his above-mentioned claims. He cannot help but to acknowledge and enumerate the sources of conflict between and among siblings in Sulod society. Jocano acknowledged that multiple affiliation of the Sulod as soon as he marries and inheritance problems undermine the structure of sibling unity (1968: 114). And in case studies which he employed as illustrations, a good number, in fact, reveals otherwise. To give an important illustration; the violation of the incest taboo involving siblings showed both the resulting condemnation of the Sulod community but also the unsuccessful hold of its moral system on its members. Take the case below.

Bernan, 45 years-old, of Buri had two children, Iniyas (male), 16 years-old, and Dolin (female), 14 years-old. When their mother died, Bernan married another woman from Bedas, a lower sitio of Buri. The two children did not get along too well with their stepmother, so they decided to live separately. After talking it over with their father, Iniyas and Dolin built a hut on the hillside nearest the swidden of Iniyas and two hills from their father’s house. A year later, the people noticed that Dolin was pregnant. They knew she was not married and they suspected Iniyas to be responsible. The rumor spread.

[As events unfolded later,] Dolin confessed to her father that it was her brother, Iniyas, who was the father of her baby. The incident created a scandal in the area... Bernan, to save face, publicly denounced and cursed his children, saying that he did not have “any children anymore” (Case Study 9, pp. 112-113).

The kinship system was unduly privileged by the anthropologist Jocano as a heuristic device in order to delineate the ethnic identity of Sulod people. To construct such an ethnic identity with the kinship system serving as the rationale concretizes an abstraction. Moreover, to then employ such a model of local society to comprehend the broader anthropological reality requires an unjustified leap of faith. The kinship system may differentiate an ethnic group and in the process exclude others, but such a system cannot cover broader groups of which the Sulodnons are part. Regrettably, what Jocano has achieved in the monograph, mainly served to reinforce a tendency in the discourse of Philippine Studies. This tendency gives greater weight to the world of our constructs rather than the constructs of our world. The former is the world of abstraction, while the latter are abstractions derived from the world.

Alicia Magos' Bukidnon Ethnic Identity

The former director of the Center for Western Visayan Studies (CWVS) Alicia P. Magos is currently with the Social Science Faculty of the U.P. in the Visayas. She earned both her Master of Arts and Doctor of Philosophy in Philippine Studies at the U.P. Asian Center where Landa Jocano was one of the senior members of its Faculty. In an interview (Villa, 2002), a local journalist noted that Alicia Magos considered Landa Jocano as one of her mentors. This academic filiation may explain Magos' keen interests about the Bukidnons of Central Panay.

Sometime in 1993 on a modest grant by the French government, Magos traveled into the central section of Panay Island to retrieve what remain of epics still being chanted there. Thereafter, she made use of her sabbatical leave from teaching to continue her epic retrieval work. What she considers as her lifetime contribution to research was her recording of the Bukidnons' epics. Her efforts have indeed yielded a harvest: she is currently finalizing the translation and readying for publication the ten (10) epics which she earlier submitted to the National Commission for Culture and the Arts starting in 1996. In 1996 too, she contributed two (2)

Educational Reform Program (ERP) Series of monographs to the U.P.-Center for Integrative and Development Studies (CIDS). From this body of work, Magos lays down the bases from which the ethnic identity of central Panay's indigenous people is established.

Magos asserts that locality marks the identity of these people as residents of certain territory. "They delineate their territory," of the Bukidnon she wrote, "and distinguished themselves from other mountain groups by using the big river systems as point of reference" (Magos, 1999: 6). The Bukidnons even maintain an internal distinction, according to her, the Pan-ayanons are those from the river of Pan-ay and Halawodnon are from the Halawod River. These people, Magos continues, reckoned their group identity with their mythic ancestry. Pan-aynons traced theirs to a certain Dimaano and Halawodnons to a certain Berdin (Magos, 1999: 6,9). But what is pivotal for the construction of Bukidnons' identity in Magos' ethnography are their epics. She writes, "...the identity of the Panay-Bukidnon culture can be reconstructed through these epics which serve as their link to the ancient past" (Magos, 1999: p.6). Yet there are aspects which can be analytically glossed over, if Bukidnons' life ways are viewed from the prism of epics.

I am singling-out for critical comments an article that Magos published in 1999 entitled, "Sea Episodes in the *Sugidanon* (Epic) and the Boat-building Tradition in Central Panay" (Magos, 1999: 5-29). In this revealing essay, she indicates her ways of doing ethnography and shows how she imagined the link between the mythical world of the epics and the Bukidnons' practical life. "[T]he Panay-Bukidnon and the epic people," according to Magos, "belong to the same group of people. There are striking similarities in their culture and these reflected in their family and social life, socio-political structure and means of livelihood" (1999: 25). In this essay, the epic was employed as the reference point by Magos to verify the Bukidnons' boat-building tradition. Such an approach, however, reverses the primacy of real life over the imaginary in ethnographic practice.

By comparison, the boats in the epics are elaborate in design, whereas in reality the Bukidnons build but simple and functional boats today. In the epics, the boats are vessels that show-off the distinguished status of central characters. Warriors, for instance, take these boats in their journey to battle or in search of their lifelong mate. While the Bukidnon *kaingin* (swidden) farmers built rafts and small boats at river head to ferry agricultural produce downstream. These contrasts undermine the connection between epics and boat-building tradition which was earlier claimed by Magos. The more plausible connection, it seems to me, is that the established practice of boat-building, pivotal as this is to the survival of the Bukidnons, has seeped into the world of the epic composition. Furthermore, whereas Magos contextualized the connection she claimed in epic time, a strong dose of historical time could have corrected this obvious flaw in her argumentation.

There is a danger indeed, when in the project of constituting an ethnographic identity, the researcher collapses the existential world of indigenous people and the symbolic world of their epics. Needless to say, the primacy of the epics in ethnographic work should not be overestimated. Though collection of epics is a laudable life-long work for anthropologists, it is but one aspect among the many tasks in a comprehensive ethnography. A comprehensive ethnography should not exclude the mundane and routine life of the people being studied. Alicia Magos could have presented a more comprehensive picture of the Bukidnons had she not been waylaid by the labors of unearthing the ethno-fiction in their epics.

Ethnographic Realism

In the production of knowledge, the previously discussed textual representations by Landa Jocano and Magos can be located within the ambit of mainstream ethnographic realism. Both tried to construct the ethnic identity of the indigenous people of Central Panay by focusing on certain aspects of these people's ways of life. Whereas Jocano privileged the kinship system as fulcrum of the Sulodnons' identity, Magos viewed

the Bukidnon's instrumental activities through the eye-piece of her collected epics. The Sulodnon/Bukidnon people as the "other" in their ethnography were represented without the necessary ambiguity and self reflectiveness that typifies the science of the social today. Small wonder that their complete picture appears low in resolution and remains unfamiliar.

To delineate a group's identity, academics often neglect the caveat that ethnicity is but an abstraction, a heuristic devise that is employed by anthropologists to make sense of his/her dispersed data or observations concerning social organizations. And it is not difficult for transference to occur from model to actual reality without the restraint of ethnographic reflexivity. Needless to say, Jocano's and Magos' ethnographic representations presupposed that the Sulodnon/Bukidnon society is one that fits their model of a coherent, well-functioning and integrated social whole. This presupposition can be viewed as structural-functionalist flaw of ethnographic realism.

Marcus and Cushman (1982) noted that ethnographic realists are characterized by their almost totalizing description of the studied group, by their omnipresent but un-intrusive narration, by their near rigid view that the group's view is being represented and by their use of constructs which bypass attention to the context of the native language. These characteristics are remarkable in their representations where fieldwork experience is radically separated from their ethnography which is actually the product of fieldwork. But "what gives the ethnographer authority and the text a pervasive sense of concrete reality," as Marcus and Cushman observe, "is the writer's claim to represent a world as only one who has known it first-hand can" (Marcus and Cushman, 1982: 29). So, when ethnographic texts are simply duplication of experience, what is obtained is absolute representation with the anthropologist as the authorial power. This is a matter of the knower having power over who are being known.

The absence of reflexivity easily lends ethnographic realism as a procedure to instrumentalization (Marcus, 1980). As a procedure of gathering data, it is no different from "intelligence gathering". The

revelation of one U.P. anthropology graduate has shown this to be so when in 1978, he was invited to participate as researcher in the “Area Study on Insurgency and Development” (ASIA) project (Castro, 1996). He eventually rejected participating but I can imagine a number of people and institutions being compromised by this research. Philippine Studies should be marked by doubt and concern because the production of knowledge in this field, without restraining reflexivity, can imperil vulnerable groups in our society. It should be emphasized that the anthropologist’s theoretical and methodological position occupies the same locus as with their ethical standpoint.

My point on the matter is that the intellectual-ethical responsibility of Filipino social scientists is to be conscious that the knowledge they generate, like their actions, have attendant consequences. When vulnerable groups are the subject of such knowledge, special attention must be made to power relations that are implicated in their project. The angst and trepidations of social scientists should be over procedures of representation, yet recognizing and accepting that the outcome may still be unsure and elusive. Where the ethnographic procedures and representations of both Jocano and Magos may not offer consolation in the troubled mindscape of Filipino social scientists, the remaining task at hand is to continue the production of liberating bodies of knowledge and practices.

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