The Bicol Dotoc: Performance, Postcoloniality, and Pilgrimage

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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Aberystwyth University.
Summary:

The dotoc is a religious devotion to the Holy Cross in Bicol, Philippines. Women cantors take the role of pilgrims journeying to the Holy Land to visit the Holy Cross or performers reenact as komedyà St. Helene’s search and finding of the cross. The practice was introduced by the Spanish colonizers, but I argue that the dotoc appropriates the colonial project of conversion, translating it into strategies of survival, individual agency, communal renewal, and the construction of identity, through the performance of pilgrimage. I grapple with issues of ethnographic authority and representation. The project is a journey back to childhood and to a place called home, to sights, sounds, smells, tastes recollected in the many stories of informants, or experienced on recent visits as a participant in the performances, but it is also already a journey of a stranger. I am an insider studying my own culture from the outside.

Using a Badiourian framework combined with de Certeau’s practice of everyday life and Conquergood’s methodology, the thesis explores how fidelity to the enduring event of the dotoc becomes an ethnographic co-performance with active subjects. Theirs is a vernacular belief and practice that cuts off the seeming infinity of the colonial experience in the imagination of the present. The centrality of the actors and their performance is a practice of freedom, but also of hope. The performances are always done for present quotidian ends, offered in an act of faith within a reciprocal economy of exchange.

Chapter 1 poses the major questions and my initial answers and thus provides an overview of the journey ahead. Chapter 2 locates the dotoc in the field of cultural performance, problematizes my ‘gaze’ as traveller, as insider-researcher, as ‘indigenous ethnographer’, and sets down my own path of ethnographic co-performance inspired by Dwight Conquergood. Chapter 3 gets down to the details of the ethnography. Chapter 4 is a probing of the postcolonial predicament, which ends with Badiou and a decision to keep to the politics of the situation. Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 take up the dotoc as a practice of fidelity that is integrally woven into the performers’ everyday life and informed by autochthonous concepts of power, gender, and exchange.
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