

# MUSEOLOGY, IDENTITY AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF MATERIAL CULTURE\*

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The article expounds on the categories and characteristics of identity and ethnicity. More importantly, the discourse highlights the processes of their formation through objects.

In the representation of identity through objects, praxis (general capacity to act such that beliefs are in agreement with the world represented through them) remains the integral activity by which the claims of a group identity can be assessed.

These concepts of identity and ethnicity as embodied by ambiguous objects which can accommodate different interpretations would have numerous implications on the work and the role of museums and other repositories of material culture.

The Philippines is an archipelago made up of more than 7,000 islands. In these islands live people of diverse languages and culture. One of the tasks of every government since the Philippines became a republic in 1946, is to create a cohesive nation. Other factors such as social inequality and class differentiation contribute to making the project of nation-building difficult.

State institutions reflect the Philippines' nation formation. One of these is the National Museum which houses a collection of objects representing the different cultural groups found within the country. As symbols of a multicultural nation, the objects ideally should be equally represented through the museum collection policy, the exhibition displays, and so on. But in practice this is yet to be achieved. For the moment there is a predilection towards privileging the lowland, urban,

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\* Nb. This text has similarly gone through a transformation. Field research, more reading and discussions with people helped to improve the seminal ideas proposed during my participation in the *UGAT* conference.

Christian and Westernised groups. Although not necessarily the majority, this dominant group controls the politics. Other groups are consequently marginalised. Hence despite the rhetoric of 'unity in diversity' or cultural pluralism, the concept of the Filipino identity remains fractious.

The role of museums in nation-building needs to be examined in the context of its ability to create or typecast ethnic identities through their collection. It must be equally investigated through a study of the perception of local people regarding their ethnic and national identities as expressed or embodied in objects, and when and where they refer to them. The broad theme of this essay is concerned with the processes of identity formation through objects. The constant negotiation of group identities in ethnographic museums because of the growing interest between classification and authenticity suggests that identities are not fixed. This is also true outside museums. In practice there is a discrepancy between what people say they are and the way they shift among a range of identities available to them, depending on the shifting situation and historical context. I will be concerned with the choices of identity that people make within the institutionalised framework of ethnicity and nationalism, particularly those structures established by the museum setting.

In this sense, cultural objects contribute to the representation of ethnic identity among groups of people. Objects may be the means for expressing people's knowledge, sentiments and values. Among symbols of ethnicity the most powerful are ambiguous objects which can accommodate different interpretations. Objects can also be used as markers of identity. As manmade products, they can be changed and used to redefine traditional boundaries (and ethnicity) that have become restrictive. The use of objects may change, and with that comes changes in their significance. The issues of how the identities of objects and people change with time is another subject for study.

The experience of ethnic identity is essentially a representation in itself: groups are capable of creating identities in different ways through expressing distinctive, suitable attributes. We can observe how what may seem to be a self-conception held in common by a group of people can be traced to their awareness of how other groups perceive them.

The issue of identity goes beyond the geographic boundaries separating groups of people. In this sense, a paradox exists: although the maintenance of separate ethnic identities is commonly believed to be disruptive and divisive in nation-building, the preservation, continuity

or construction of ethnic identities is celebrated during periods when the nation justifies its provenance. The National Museum and other state cultural institutions are mandated to create archetypes of the national culture, drawing primeval sources together through a collection of multifarious objects. This goal reflects the view that objects represent fixed identities. The premise of this practice, as stated earlier, characterises the Philippines as a nation made up of different ethnic groups with stable referents. In practice this is translated into a classification of explicit cultural boxes which reinforces a contrast between authentic and inauthentic identities.

The anthropological concept of identity is difficult to pin down into a definition which circumscribes all the issues it involves. It is a difficult term because of the many levels of the concept of self and social categories it addresses. Identity may be examined through its attributes which constitutes the contents list encapsulating an identity. It may also be understood from observing the processes of social identity formation. Situations and contexts in which identity (e.g., ethnicity) are formed and asserted, contribute to the anthropological interest.

The study of identity also comes within the scope of psychology and philosophy: it brings up fundamental questions of classification and the recognition of similarities and differences, as well as issues of self-person-individual personality. Generally, identities are conceptually constructed out of the characteristics by which individuals or groups are recognised by others and by themselves. Identity may refer to people's sense of who and what they are and where they belong in human society (e.g., their class, gender, ethnic, national and other social identities). Such statements may not give us a clear definition of what identity is; but they suggest an idea of what we assume it is all about.

In order to explain the problem disclosed in this essay, I am beginning by discerning the contexts of identity formation. This process could be active where individuals come together to claim or create their identity. It could also be passive in the context where they are grouped together and accept the identity given to them by others. Modern Western culture places a high value on the individual who is expected to be self-sufficient and self-contained. By this I mean that an individual person is conceived of having "an identity." But individuals are not just single isolated humans — they are part of ethnic groups and nations.

Much of the anthropological literature of the past decade has argued that nations and cultures are not bounded, continuous over time, or

internally homogeneous (see Anderson, 1991 and Smith, 1986). It is no longer useful for anthropologists to imagine cultures as collective individuals possessed of common properties and characterised by that "identity" so central to the individualistic worldview. Rather it is more fruitful to think of cultures and groups as being continually reconstructed, realigned and reimagined, as various actors negotiate their social lives.

In this sense, I am looking at identity from a social perspective. The options for a sense of identity are largely determined by what is available in society, but people can and choose between socially structured possibilities and in this way have some autonomy. Identity, in this context, is assigned. Another view, which I hope to explore emphasizes identity as an open, autonomous and self-creating system. This process may involve asserting the identity before its acceptance by the group. But these have to be a shared, collective, explicit and conscious process.

The term identity can include social identity, cultural identity and ethnic identity, terms which refer to the identification of self with a specific social position, cultural tradition or ethnic group. It may be taken to imply the identification or self-conception held in common by a group of people. Whatever the words used, it is important to keep in mind that the process of identification is contextual and the criteria can change.

Social categories are concepts that classify a population into types and there is sometimes debate over whether the categorisation simply describes already occurring differences between people, and whether the process of classification constructs those differences. How fixed or how salient is an identity? The social categories depend on identifying characteristics that can distinguish one set of people from other social sets. Thus there are the social categories of gender, ethnicity, and class or of sexual orientation, disability, age, and so on.

The processes of identification moreover imply the social construction of an identity. In this sense, I am using social construction to refer to the fact that aspects of society or social behaviour are actively 'constructed' as a result of social relations and values, and human agency, rather than being 'natural' or biological in origin. This concept usually carries the implication that the pattern of behaviour is not fixed forever, or beyond human control. On the contrary it can be changed, and will vary from one historical period to another, and from one society or culture to another.

Social categories are represented to others and symbolised or epitomised in certain attributes by certain things. This ability to

symbolise is a distinctively human activity. We can make one object symbolise or represent another object. Language is an example of a symbolic system where an event happens and we can then talk about it to others. The words we use are symbols which stand for the sequence of actions being described. Apart from words and objects, rites and actions are also part of our symbolic systems.

Symbols are arbitrary in the sense that humans are capable of making almost anything stand for something else. But the social use of symbols in communication depends on social agreement and interaction. Mead (1934) developed the concept of symbolic interactionism which tries to link together the psychology of the individual with the social, to explain the process through which children acquire a sense of self and become members of society (i.e., socialisation). He stressed the importance of shared symbols and the interaction of parents and children which led to the passing on of culture through generations.

Representations are vital in the process of constructing an identity, and also that representations are the bridge between the individual and the social, and between the public and the private. Different cultures may have very different ideas about identity. Social representations of identity, which are already in existence and which are transferred from society to individual, span a number of levels. These could be examined from the perspectives of the self, of others and by others. There are very broad representations in Philippine culture about what it means to be human, to be a private individual and to have a personality, while there are more specific representations associated with different social categories. These might be contradictory or in the process of change. The questions of correspondence, conflict and change of representations of identity could be explored by analysis. As an example, the traditional concept of being an *Igorot* has been represented as about fierceness, primitiveness, savagery, and being uncivilised. But this representation is being challenged as more ethnic groups claim to be *Igorot* and consequently put forward new representations.

Moreover, representations must be matched or set against reality. True or false representations may be examined by determining their significance on the basis of their selection, bias, salience or randomness. It is important to remember that dominant images of gender and ethnicity are sometimes simply that — images, stereotypes or fantasies. But these are nevertheless powerful images because the social representations available in a society are the materials from which people must construct

their personal sense of identity and the intensity of feeling associated with it. A distinction between appearance and reality, therefore, has to be made.

Self-representation varies according to situations but is interactive, depending on its response to outsiders. The anthropologist as observer may aim to describe how the world looks from the other culture's point of view. But social actors may think of themselves and represent themselves differently according to the situation or context. The observers' questions may bias the reply or their presence may also change the situation. In the attempt to describe how the world looks to the social actors, there is a need to question outsiders. Apart from the effect of the observer's presence, the presence of tourists, or a museum public may also affect the behaviour and actions of the actors. Potentially representation transforms to conform to the observer's selection of, questions to, and presence among the social actors. The construction or salience of identity, as well as its purpose and interaction depends too on the setting of the observation, such as the home, village, city, museum, tourist's site, or feast day.

Although it might seem easy to identify an ethnic group according to a set system of self-identity and stereotyping the observer must be aware that the group is by no means homogeneous. Such a group will contain, for example, gender differences, class differences and generational differences. Interactions among these will lead to shift or salience of identities. The criteria for selecting objects for my investigation will refer to these as well as points where claims of meaning and ownership are contested. It is from such internal tensions, as well as external pressures, that cultural traditions may be challenged or reinforced and ethnic groups reconstructed.

Among the possible social categories, ethnicity is the most immediate in the context of my essay. The theoretical issues to be addressed further in this proposal relate to my attempt to locate ethnicity in the field. In the Philippines the concern over ethnicity refers to the social conditions in which it is expressed. Ethnic used to be part of official discourse in the Philippines as a term referring to linguistic differentiation as well as the distinct culture associated with it (i.e., an ethno-linguistic group). In this sense having an ethnic identity could be used in two ways. Having an ethnic identity could be celebrated in pride at the diversity of cultures in the Philippines. Or it could also be used to set groups apart in threatening situations and contribute to resentment as it has, for example, over the

national policy of standardising language. In social and political life, ethnicity is laden with emotive issues that need to be examined closely. It has become a political issue and a matter of political self-consciousness (see concepts of Indianity among the Concheros of Mexico by Rostas, and contemporary Haida ceremonialism in Canada by Crowther, in Herle and Phillipson, 1994).

Indigenous groups in the Philippines, such as the Bontoc, are classified as minority ethnic groups and distinguished from majority ethnic groups, such as the Tagalog. But the anthropological conception of the label "ethnic" is understood differently by and seem unsuitable to the present official discourse. It is now considered by government managers of culture and the arts as well as academics in the country to imply backwardness and primitiveness. Additionally pressures from support groups such as nongovernment organisations and indigenous groups have changed government policies to be more sensitive towards political correctness and the ethical use of the label. Given the present attitude of the Philippine government to incorporate all cultures, the rhetoric of pluralism is promoted as they aim to minimise offending any one ethnic group. Hence, in place of "tribal Filipinos", and "national minorities", the term "cultural communities" is currently in use. This came about after an agreement among committee members who prepared the proposal to establish the new National Commission on Culture and the Arts (NCCA)<sup>1</sup>. But to avoid confusion in reading this essay, I will use the term "ethnic group" throughout.

A subject for further study is the way the NCCA has taken over the task from previous government social welfare agencies in setting the agenda and discourse over cultural policies and ethics particularly those that relate to ethnic groups. This change may have been advocated by the ethnic groups themselves along with their determined efforts to resist outsiders' threats to exploit their ancestral domain. In response, government agencies wanting access to ancestral lands may have been forced to negotiate rather than merely enforce existing legislation over land ownership. The effect of the central government policy of changing the ethnic groups' category from social to cultural is of interest to me because it may give me a clue as to how outsider's influence affect local

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<sup>1</sup> Among the agencies within its jurisdiction is the Subcommittee on Cultural Communities (SCTA) and Traditional Arts as distinguished from the Subcommittee on the Arts.

people's perception of themselves in the context of national policies. What is the effect of the diminished power of social agencies (e.g., Office of Northern Cultural Communities) and the transfer of jurisdiction to a national cultural office to policies which address local people's welfare and sense of self?

Other categories to which ethnic groups belong may blur the definition of their ethnicity, but they may also expand our knowledge of the different strands which identity may involve. The interest of other groups adds to a group of people's self-consciousness. Among these others are museum staff from the metropolitan centres who contribute to the process of identity formation (Durrans, 1988).

As culture-bearing groups, Philippine ethnic groups are identified by cultural and educational managers (e.g., the central arts council, museum professionals, and academics) according to the cultural institutions which separate or incorporate them. These institutions include ceremonies, rituals, healing practices, among other things which seek to foster social cohesion. But the contexts or the bodies who make the identification may be external, such as museums and national festivals. The museum, for instance, plays a role in fixing and creating ethnicities and boundaries. In its aim to encompass social cohesion of that range, museums would gather a representative collection of all ethnic groups' objects or cultural products.<sup>2</sup> These institutions usually work on the premise of cultural pluralism.<sup>3</sup> A possible explanation for this, particularly in the National Museum's (NM) context, is that present policies bear the residue of American colonial agenda. The NM, founded in 1928, inherited its administrative office from the Bureau of Ethnological Survey which collected objects and data from all groups (PCCA, 1989).

The concept of cultural pluralism consists of accepting the existence of many cultures of equal value in the same society. It is the opposite of the notion that a society needs a dominant single cultural self-definition that all members must adhere to no matter their cultural origins. In the

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<sup>2</sup> Similarly, one of the SCTA's mandate is '(t)o preserve and to integrate traditional culture and its various creative expressions as a dynamic part of the national cultural mainstream...'

<sup>3</sup> One of the entries in Section 5 of Republic Act No. 7356 states the following: 'National cultural policies and programs shall be formulated which shall be ... *pluralistic* (my emphasis), fostering deep respect for the cultural identity of each locality, region or ethno-linguistic locality, as well as elements assimilated from other cultures through the natural process of acculturation'.



Philippine context, this is parallel to multiculturalism. Both terms are part of the official discourse, as documented in a promulgation creating the Presidential Commission on Culture and the Arts (Executive Order No. 118). The notion of cultures sharing space as embodied in a museum reflects an ideal goal to which governments aspire.<sup>4</sup> In practice this is a lot more problematic.

In examining the historiography of culture through Raymond Williams' (1976 [1958]) seminal work, the word "culture" was first used as a noun of process which related to the cultivation of crops, and, extending from that, cultivation of the human mind. In the late eighteenth century it became a noun of configuration or generalisation of the spirit which informed the whole way of life of distinct peoples. In the 19th century its meaning became bifurcated: anthropologists referred to culture as a whole and distinctive way of life and those involved in the arts and humanities referred to it as the active cultivation of the mind.

Given the above definitions of culture, the question arises as to how and why culture has become conflated with the notion of ethnicity. Early anthropological discourse, relating mostly to race and ethnicity studies, is a contributing factor. If the anthropological concept of culture is used to develop policies which involve culture and ethnicity it becomes problematic. Clearly, culture and ethnicity are separate categories, but their conflation (when used in the context of multiculturalism) can lead to assumptions that ethnic specificity is necessarily attached to particular forms of cultural production. To give an example, multicultural art is often seen to be synonymous with folk art. But folk art, like any other art form, is not informed solely by ethnicity. Class, gender, religion, politics, habitus, and a range of other factors come into play.

I am arguing here that ethnicity is encompassed by culture, but culture is greater than ethnicity. Hence, cultural production and consumption are informed by a number of factors. Class differences, for instance, may foreground these. Quite obviously, when we extrapolate one factor, culture, and use this to refer to an ethnic group, we are not getting the whole picture.

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<sup>4</sup> In 1971, Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau announced his plan for a policy of "multiculturalism within a bilingual framework." Australia began its policy for multicultural arts in the mid-70s, while New Zealand had its biculturalism since 1992 (in Kaino, 1994:2).

The special frame of my research is the study of objects in the context of identity and ethnicity. "Ideas are often conveyed not by words but by things," according to Morphy (1994:664). As symbols, objects can be a means of expression among individuals, of culture and identity. They can also be signs or clues to identity. In other contexts, objects are instruments of controlling identity. A perceptive analysis of objects, such as Mackenzie's (1991) analysis of Telefolmin string bags ("androgynous objects"), can show how these are linked to concepts of the world through a cultural praxis. I am using praxis here to denote the general capacity to act so that one's projects and beliefs (i.e., identity) are in agreement with the world represented through them, together with a presumption that belief and action are not so sharply separable as empiricist theories of knowledge would require them to be. It is an activity that removes the necessity for false consciousness. Praxis sustains itself without ideology, since it is directed to the essential nature of social reality. In my discussion of representation of identity through objects, cultural praxis remains the integral activity by which we can assess the claims of a group identity and perceive that they are true.

The focus on form provides a starting point for an understanding of that praxis. Form in this context broadly refers to both shape and details of composition and construction. The search for the explanation of form requires unlocking or decoding particular socio-cultural processes, disclosing structures and connection which lie behind its production and use (Kopytoff, 1986). This may also lead to particular insights which would otherwise be overlooked by the observer. The analysis of cultural objects may be an excellent way to approach the question of individual and group identity, revealing how people compete with one another at one level and express common identity at another (see O'Hanlon, 1989).

The recent emphasis of many studies in the anthropology of art has undoubtedly been on art as a system of meaning and communication. For this reason the study of representational systems, or of how art encodes meaning, are of crucial importance. 'The concept of a representational system is central because there is an interrelation between meaning and the way it is encoded or represented, in other words how something is encoded may influence its meaning as well as affect how that meaning can be communicated by others' (Morphy, 1994:664). Given the difficulty and variety of ways ideas are represented, how can actors or outsiders read their meaning? One means is to discern the context by finding a consistency of meaning in various situations. Another is by determining

the source of the attribution whether insider (e.g., the makers of the object) or outsider (e.g., the observer or people from other cultures). The study of objects and images does not only involve observing the meanings given by the actors, it also includes the analysis of the objects' essence and interpretation.

It is only recently that more researches are being done on the significance of the study of the anthropology of art to the social construction of material culture. Notably, in *Ancestral Connections*, Morphy proposes that (what he refers to as) "art" can be used "as a point of entry into Yolngu society, to convey to readers from a very different cultural background something of how the Yolngu understand the world." He moreover discussed how their art performed a critical role in the "process of social and cultural transformation, and has been an important element in the social struggle to affect the form the transformations have taken" (1991:12-13).

Morphy's work, among other recent publications, encourages the use of objects as analytical tools for social research. For my future research I will be extending some of the grounds covered by his work. However I aim to focus less on art if only to give equal emphasis on other objects which are used to represent identities. Unlike the Aboriginal paintings' shift into a category within the fine arts market, there is no real possibility, for instance, for Bontoc objects to have the same opportunities. For the moment, these will remain in the category of folk art because of the way the Bontoc objects' form is classified within the art market system. Hence my study of the Bontoc will be grounded on a very different context to what Morphy has so ably achieved with the Yolngu (cf. Appadurai, 1986).

This argument leads to the question on types of objects admitted to representational categories. In a system of classification, the type of objects which represent an identity are part of a group's characteristics or essence. Tokens or examples from this type are also used to be part of the representation of the group, as in the case of objects transmitted to another site. The selection of types of objects could cross-over between an archetype and a stereotype. On the one hand, archetypes of objects are believed to be their quintessence because they are designated as original, or model, after which other things are copied. In this sense, Morphy's reference to art is the quintessence of the Yolngu world. Conversely, stereotypes of objects allude to an image of or attitude towards persons or groups which is based not on observation and experience but on preconceived ideas. Such stereotypes are often analysed as part of the

symbolism of social and group relations, since they both reflect and perpetuate social divisions. Consequently, an object in this category may be regarded as a misrepresentation of the identity of a group.

The issue over objects as representation and misrepresentation of group identity is a complex one but could be understood in relation to ritual. In a ritual setting, each symbolic object or quality usually possesses a broad fan of meanings ranging from physiological and psychological referents to social and abstract ones (cf. Turner, 1967). The "meaning" of a ritual is thus complex and ambiguous. So a ritual has many levels of meaning and many possible ambiguities, but serves ultimately to relate abstract principles and social relations to physiological and psychological realities, though not in a simplistic or deterministic fashion.

Like ritual, significant objects which have drawn much attention or value may just be as ambiguous. Hence actors' attribution to the objects' meaning and symbolic power in different contexts. To decide whether an object has been used to represent and misrepresent a group depends on language and political administration. Thus, people who would identify themselves as Bontoc in one context, may identify themselves later on the basis of what village they come from or the kin group they belong (e.g., Maligcong, Samoki, Bontoc Poblacion, among others). Whatever the ethnic groups distinguished, the observer must be alert to the sources of diversity within them and the interactive construction of identity.

In this regard, it is not possible to separate the issue of representing identity from the concept of "identity as an analytical tool to unpick cultural diversity" (Banks, 1996: 143). Although I have cited the use of cultural objects as a means to represent identities, it is valuable for this discussion to focus on the category of identities. One category refers to an active construction of identity where the self is represented through art or objects. Another is the passive acknowledgement by reading ethnic identity on art or objects. In either category, it is significant to establish who has constructed or read an identity into/onto an object. Among them could be the Philippine State, or borne out of an accident of history where certain collected objects' provenance became important or even valuable. They could also be anthropologists who until recently have been the primary authority on ethnographic collections. Moreover, current studies have attributed sources of objects' meanings to the makers themselves or to the local people. In further examining why identities are read on or constructed through objects, it is also worthwhile to

investigate (for example when examining the social role of Bontoc textiles), what specific social categories are being referred? What are the criteria for the selected categories (cf. Weiner and Schneider, 1989)?

As a museologist working in the Philippines, my initial acquaintance with the Bontoc began with the textile collection of an ethnology museum. These were among other textiles I worked with while preparing for an exhibition. The system of classification within the framework of a museum is effectively a system which stereotypes ethnic groups based on their collectible objects. In fact I used a formalist approach to distinguish one from another group's textiles, which meant I focused on the designs, colours, weaving patterns and material used. This method was put to the test, however, when more contemporary textiles arrived and I found it difficult to attribute certain styles to any one group.

Museums tend to legitimise representations of identity because it is the site where real objects are encountered through exhibitions and research. Kaplan suggests that as social institutions, museums are a "potent force in forging self consciousness, within specific historical contexts and as part of a political process of democratization". The collections of objects in museums play "important roles in creating national identity and in promoting national agendas" (1995:1-2). By its democratic disposition or mandate, a museum makes itself far more accessible than other historical institutions which keep collections such as aristocrats' mansions or cathedrals. This accessibility has helped in shaping perspectives of identity to the extent that some indigenous groups have used museum collections to instruct their young or to make them remember (cf. Connerton, 1989).

Conversely, some groups view museums as the repositories of objects taken away from them. Much more strongly, the Australian Aborigines voice their resentment and outrage that their ancestral bones, paintings and secrets have been stolen and put in museums and private collections. According to them, the European frame of looking at objects (e.g., galleries and reproduction in books) results not only in their loss of material culture but it also deprives them of indigenous knowledge (especially in cases when a painting meant for restricted view because of its secret knowledge is made public) and denies them access to their ancestors (Morphy, 1991:25). It is precisely the many views of the museums' role by the people they represent which I want to explore in this study. Previously I have conducted research on museums by using the institutional framework of policies and administration. I am more aware

of its national role and strategies taken up by museum directors and curators to implement their mandate. But I have yet to examine the impact of the museum structure to people whose identities are embodied in the objects painstakingly researched and classified in its collections. By taking the Bontoc as a focus of my exploration of the relationship between identity and representation in objects, I plan to examine and reconstruct the “significant nodes, circuits, and intersections through which objects pass as they move in and out of categories” (Flores, 1993:1) as it is constructed by human agency.

I also realised at the time of my initial acquaintance with Bontoc textiles that the limitations of ethnographic museum work were not just confined to its established systems, but that it has not developed at the same pace as academic anthropology. Durrans expressed this contradiction succinctly:

Exhibitions have tended to stress the complexity and integration, and (at most) the regional affiliations of culture, rather than their susceptibility to change or how they compare with others in different times, locations, or degrees of complexity. This conforms to the dominant paradigm of academic anthropology of at least a generation before, and thereby confirms how marginal museum ethnography has been to mainstream anthropological thinking (Durrans, 1988: 163).

As I have mentioned in the introduction, I aim to explore symbols of ethnicity as embodied by ambiguous objects which can accommodate different interpretations. My hypothesis is that the shared meanings are gradually but loosely understood within a social group. I would like to find out how much variation there is to the Bontoc interpretation and compare it with Boas' study of symbolism in Plain Indian art.

Morphy states that “objects were hardly studied at all for much of the twentieth century, making it difficult to contribute to more general anthropological theory, such as the effectiveness of a ritual, where an understanding of the way in which objects were used and understood might have proved invaluable” (1994:656). More importantly there is a need to examine objects beyond their meaning and structure and begin to address these in terms of the total social life. In the past, cultural objects have served only as evidence or adjunct to main anthropological issues. In the last few years, according to Mackenzie (1991) interest in

material culture and technology has seen a revival. Yet despite recent attempts by anthropologists to analyse operational sequences to reveal objects' social meaning, she does not think they go far enough. She proposes "a framework which would enable one to see how the object becomes constructed as a social form endowed with culturally specific meanings, and to then allow an interpretation of that cultural form which includes indigenous understandings" (Mackenzie, 1991:25).

Mackenzie's approach in her study of Telefolmin string bags takes into account the social organisation involved as well as the process. This involves the contexts of the cultural construction of the bags from different stages of production to consumption. Each stage informs the final product but Mackenzie stresses that academic inquiry needs to look into consumption as a factor that affects the outcome of the object. Miller is advocating the study of consumption for another perspective in viewing the embeddedness of people's selves in objects. He demonstrates this by writing:

There is considerable evidence to suggest that as consumption comes to play a greater part in cultural life as against production and exchange, this need not in any sense diminish that dialectical process of societal self-construction which is culture. Indeed, much of its importance might well lie in the struggle by which peoples re-evoke their pluralism in the face of new massive and often distant institutions. This means that consumption may generate in everyday life far more diverse personhoods, social relations and communities than presupposed by the standard theories and terms of sociology or economics (Miller, 1995:290).

Thomas' description of the process involves the "mutability of things in recontextualisation" (1991: 28). Objects, especially heirloom pieces, do not "embody pure intentions." In each stage they go through, objects assume the context with which they belong. Thus another stage is reached by Bontoc heirloom pieces when purchased for a museum collection. Their relative value would be assessed on a different basis with the way the Bontoc have assessed them. But their former use or position in Bontoc society may inform their new symbolic, status and monetary value within the museum context. Thomas notes that: "The symbolic and political claims and risks are always engaged with what some visions would split off as fundamental or straightforward uses — but what could be more

fundamental than making a political claim or representing difference? What we are confronted with is thus never more or less than a succession of uses and recontextualizations" (1991:29). In this regard, I hope to observe provisionally selected Bontoc objects and follow them through contexts, use, evaluation and processes of the community. This proposed study will test the strength of this approach.

It is specifically the form of externalisation of culture as symbols which I wish to explore further. I would like to investigate the Bontoc type, token and stereotype as epitomised in objects. When manifested in cultural objects, this externalising may account for the objects' tendency to be multivalent and of complex social and symbolic value. In this way, the identity of the Bontoc could be represented and embodied in those objects. Whether the importance of certain objects was generated from interests outside (i.e., museums and private collectors) or not, the contemporary uses of the objects in forging self-identity may play a significant part in the process of externalising their culture. Hence, the settings where the objects are found, such as the museum, market or village, are factors which influence the role in creating identity and to or for whom this is made.

To summarise, the main areas which I will investigate in a future research involve the types of traits or characteristics of identity, as well as the settings where these are found. Relevant to this approach is the study of classification of represented objects, and an evaluation of the issue of primordial and instrumental identification in relation to groups of people and to objects as sign. I will focus on stereotypes and analyse why and how these are given meaning in context, setting and use. These will then be compared with the multivalent meanings available. Through the invocation of habitus and praxis in my investigation, I hope to cite instances of continuity and change in the process of identification by a group of people like the Bontoc, and those made by others. Notably, the role of museums would be pursued because these are settings that legitimise ethnicity. Museums, with their available facilities for research, collection, documentation and exhibition, are useful institutions for apprehending and understanding the processes of identity construction.



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