

Exclusions, Inclusions:

The Higaunon as Voice in Cagayan de Oro Museography

Dr. Antonio J. Montalvan II

Doctor of Anthropology

Director, A. Brown Museum, Cagayan de Oro City, Philippines

Vice Chairman, ICOM Philippines

Chairman, National Committee on Museums, National Commission for Culture and the Arts,
Republic of the Philippines (NCCA-NCOM)

Member, International Committee for Museums and Collections of Archaeology and History
(ICMAH)

Former President, Mindanao Association of Museums (MAM)

Address: A Brown Museum

North Kitanglad Heritage Foundation

Xavier Estates, Masterson Avenue

Cagayan de Oro City 9000, Philippines

e-mail: antonmonta@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Hitherto the prehistoric home of the Higaunon indigenous peoples, Cagayan de Oro in Northern Mindanao, Philippines narrates its story from the perspective of its Visayan migrants. It is a narrative told with the predilection of upland-lowland dynamics, the lowland culture being socio-politically dominant. It is believed the Visayan migrants began their intrusions into Higaunon territory as early as the 16th century or earlier. As they gradually occupied the coastal lowlands, the Higaunons retreated to the highlands far removed from the coastal settlements which in time developed polities ruled by Hispanized Visayan educated elites. Visayan dominance became the yardstick for cultural assimilation over a period of 300 years. This continues to influence contemporary historiography and museography that to this day emphasize this dominance to the exclusion of the Higaunon. The Higaunon have become a forgotten people, their voices unheard, their images unseen. This paper examines the counter-approach of a Cagayan de Oro museum aimed to restore the memory of the Higaunon as primordial agents in the rewriting of Cagayan de Oro museography. Higaunons contributed their own possessions to the museum and told their stories. Moreover, it gave them active participation in the interpretation of objects at display using their own language, Binukid. The museological philosophy and the resulting museography bring together three elements: community, collection, voice. Higaunon perspective comes out in telling the Cagayan de Oro

narrative, yet without superimposing another layer of exclusion to its Visayan migrant elements, thus the construction of a new form of dialogue. Through Higaunon curatorial personality, the museum aims to transform the viewpoint of its museum publics by generating a fresh outlook and attitude toward indigenous peoples in a global ethic of inclusion and openness.

Orientations

The A. Brown Museum in Cagayan de Oro City, Mindanao, in the southern Philippines, is a corporate museum in the making that is yet to be opened. It has completed collection and documentation and is formulating the curatorial planning phase before it opens to the public.

Its progenitor A. Brown Company is a wholly Filipino owned company with diverse business interests in property development, power generation, agriculture, mining, mass transport and leisure. Operating agricultural interests in the Higaunon hinterland segments of Bukidnon province in Mindanao, it has direct contacts with Higaunon communities and their hierarchy of leaders known as *datus*. It was in this circumstance that the company was formally requested by the local council of *datus* to assist them, in their own words, “preserve their culture.”

Through anthropological brokering by way of community dialogues, the people related how they had began to lose their old heirloom pieces, mostly Chinese Guangdong jars, vases and plates that their ancestors had acquired over time from overland trading with the coast. Exchanged through the practice of commodities barter probably starting from the pre-Hispanic years and on to the Hispanic colonial era, hinterland peoples would bring their products to the coast, usually in the form of hemp, beeswax and land produce, and would be paid back by antique Chinese pottery and porcelain, or brass wares in the case with trade with Muslim neighbors to their west. It is believed this practice dates back to the pre-Hispanic and the early Hispanic years when Chinese trade wares reached its zenith on Philippine shores. They had related to us how, in recent years, many of these pieces now mostly used as ritual devices had dissipated through the years through the entry of scrupulous traders who would buy their heirlooms for a song. How can we help them stop the cultural hemorrhage, they had asked.

I shall not belabor the point of history, of how the Higaunon people emanated from the Proto-Manobo ethnolinguistic speakers of the diverse indigenous peoples of Mindanao, Philippines; of how the timidly introverted Higaunon gradually retreated to the hinterlands from what was once believed to be their coastal lifeworld now only made real through their chants and genealogies; of how that coastal withdrawal eventually superimposed on the Mindanao coast the proliferation of migrants of Visayan ethnolinguistic speakers whose lifeways were not always consonant with the Higaunon; and of how eventual Hispanic and American colonization created dominant coastal polities that saw the hinterland as the margin of the center that was the coast.

But to return to their predicament, the urgency with which they asked for cultural assistance was as real as the ethical problem it could pose: how can the company extend what they wanted

without creating another hegemonic layer over them that will take away their proprietary rights over heirlooms that they themselves had wanted protected? They had called these heirlooms *bahandi*,¹ and bahandi was as essential to their ritual as was the rice wine *pangasi* and the betel nut chew *mamâ*.

But they had also pointed out their own sense of agency for adaptation: over the years, when they started to realize how the bahandi was becoming endangered, they had shifted to alternatives – plates and saucers bought from the town market, a distilled bottled brew rather than the native wine, and recently minted Philippine Peso coins for the offerings where the erstwhile coins bearing the likeness of Queen Isabela of Spain once ruled ritual offertories. They were not seen as substitutes, for in essence, the substance of their rituals had not changed even as they had embraced social change, the Higaunon would intimate.

Community and Collection

From the dialogues emerged the idea of a museum. For sure, the idea came from the anthropological broker. It was deemed the only effective way to stop the material depletion. When this was explained to them that the museum was principally a place of preservation – protection – of their bahandi, was it received with initial acceptance. They themselves proposed the manner of acquisition. The company would pay them for the bahandi at a price that was commensurate to the object's cultural value, that this was to be mutually agreed upon, and that they would retain their proprietary rights over them as sacred objects in religious ritual. One datu had suggested the last: each year, on a mutually agreed date, Higaunon leaders will hold a religious ritual inside the museum together with museum personnel. This was an idea that had not seen praxis elsewhere in this part of the Philippines. It was to be a version of a community-rooted museum that the Higaunon themselves had formulated according to their own tradition and perspectives. The first step of the Inclusion vis-à-vis the Exclusion was taking form through collaborative participation.

The collections policy of the future museum logically followed. It was to be a museum of Higaunon bahandi, but in the context of their exclusion from the dominant historiography and museography of the region. It was to be expressed as well in legal form – a Free, Prior and Informed Consent² was part of the phase of mutual agreements with them.

In no time, Higaunons flocked to bring their objects. It was a humbling experience: many of the pieces had been with them for generations. They were bringing it because they wanted it protected. Their stories were composed of layers of years when they had lost many of these bahandi. The narratives were heartbreaking. Learning from the constant peril of losing these heirlooms, the Higaunon have taken on a cultural practice through the years of burying their

¹ bahandi: heirloom

² The FPIC is a legal instrument, a requirement entered into with Philippine indigenous peoples to protect their cultural rights, including rights over ancestral domain among others, as mandated by the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act of 1997 or Republic Act 8371.

pieces deep in the ground for protection. But since their concept of land was not territorial but communal, the solution only became a dilemma; many of them would soon fail to recall where they buried the objects. Others lost theirs when they had to use these as payments and/or blood money for disputes. It was clearer by the day that the Higaunon were into this because they not only knew this was the safety zone for their heirlooms but more importantly because they were participants to it.

Much of the collection consisted of Chinese trade ware porcelain and potteries. One can only envisage how long these heirlooms have stayed with their families. Of many varieties were Chinese Guangdong jars which they had used over the years for the fermentation of the native wine used for the rituals. There were brown, green, blue and polychrome jars, of the types that reached Mindanao during trading with the Chinese before the Spanish colonizers came.

There were various blue-and-white Chinese plates and bowls, mostly from the Qing (Ching) dynasty. In addition, they had also considered as part of bahandi their brasswares, mostly betel nut chew boxes and lunette-shaped containers. These they had acquired from trading as well, from their neighbors to the east who had the tradition for brass casting. Many had brought out their weaponry that they had no longer used for game hunting and warfare. There were also brass combs, small brass bells originally sewn on their native clothing before they had adapted to Western dress. Musical instruments were among the rarest. Only a few still had the brass knobbed gong. About two had the two-stringed boat-shaped guitar known as *kutyapi*.

Each and every object in the collection was recorded as to their genealogical ownerships. In the course of collecting, narratives were shared. The memories added luster to what was already a rich and fine collection of bahandi never before assembled together to tell the story of the Higaunon.

Voice

It was the nature itself of the collections process that shaped the eventual form of the museum exhibition. This was a people that had been excluded from the mainstream of northern Mindanao socio-political life. The manner with which they themselves had participated in the project only reinforced the need to correct that cultural inadvertence that had persisted for years. The museum must move for Inclusion because the museum exists to instruct, and especially in this case, to rewrite what had been an omission.

Michael Baxandall articulates this for us. "It seems axiomatic that it is not possible to exhibit objects without putting a construction upon them. Long before the stage of verbal exposition by label or catalogue, exhibition embodies ordering propositions. To select and put forward any item for display, as something worth looking at, as interesting, is a statement not only about the

object but about the culture it comes from. There is no exhibition without construction and therefore – in an extended sense – appropriation.”³ (*emphasis mine*, AJM)

The need to find a technique to develop Higaunon curatorial personality became vital to the museum project. As broker and developer of the project, I had clearly seen my role as a facilitator who must be able to draw out that curatorial personality among the Higaunon. This was crucial. It was obvious that Higaunon participation did not end with collections. This was their museum and it was imperative that it was to be only their narrative that would tell the story and theirs alone.

But why “voice”? The voice of an exhibition is linked to the museum narrative, but it is different from the narrative itself. For it is the narrative that determines for the curatorial concept what the voice will be. For example, who is telling the story? What kind of person is telling the story? What is the storyteller’s position in the social milieu? Is the storyteller a “casual narrator, formal instructor, knowledgeable expert, firsthand experience, or different voices with different points of view?”⁴

Moreover, will the voice be less authoritative and more knowledge-based? Will the museum viewer also become part of the story? Like good storytelling, will it allow the “listener” of the voice to anticipate the next chapter?⁵

Furthermore, as the labels will be interpretive, will these speak in an appealing voice – “not preachy or pedantic, but not simplistic or condescending”? Will it speak in a one-way curator-to-visitor communication, rather than an open-ended interpretation?⁶ Will it set up a conversation among museum viewers?⁷ These questions are vital to a visitor-centered museum that has come of age.

Then it becomes important to ask: How many voices will there be? No one can singularly tell the story of these excluded people. The objects come from various sources. Each source had a different story to tell because each had their own genealogical roots. Thus, it was to be made clear that there be multiple voices of the emerging museum narrative.

Voice then becomes a multifarious endeavor in the museum conceptualization. It opens many ways of achieving the narrative. Will the voice be identified? In the case of a voice that uses expressions colloquial to a cultural tradition or experience that is particular to a specific person, it may become necessary for a voice to be identified and thus be given personality.⁸

³ Baxandall, Michael. “Exhibiting Intention: Some Preconditions of the Visual Display of Culturally Purposeful Objects,” in *Exhibiting Cultures, the Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*. 1991, 34.

⁴ Serrell, Beverly. *Exhibit Labels, An Interpretive Approach*. 1996, 6.

⁵ *Ibid.* 8, 12

⁶ *Ibid.* 82

⁷ *Ibid.* 91

⁸ *Ibid.* 113

To achieve that, it was necessary to assemble together a select group of Higaunon representations. Datus, ordinary men, wives, young people who would form the core of the “voice.” Their stories would be recorded by way of focus group discussions. Thus, they are the museum’s curators. They will draft the textual content of the exhibition. At the moment, this phase in the museum development is a work in progress.

By that approach, it is hoped that they will be able to assume what Michel-Rolph Trouillot refers to as three distinct capacities: 1) as *agents*, or occupants of their own positions in their cultural society, 2) as *actors* who interface in their own individual social context; and 3) as *subjects*, “that is, as voices aware of their vocality.”⁹

As curators, their role is to give flesh to the voice. The exhibition design lies outside their limits, but the voice shall eventually define the design. As voice in this case will be interpretive, it will be expressed by way of introductory texts, section texts, focus labels and object captions. Multimedia audiovisuals and sound would be considered not for their technical value but as it may be called for to reinforce the voice. It was also clear from the onset that the exhibition language will principally be Binukid, the language of the Higaunon. To anticipate the diversity of its future museum publics, subtitles and translations will also be a norm.

Serrell expresses well for us this concept of voice and its impact on the museum publics. “Whereas museums used to be more about objects and authoritative points of view, they are now more about interpretation, and whose interpretation it is should be stated. In interpretive exhibitions where museums present multiple meanings and “right” or “factual” are matters of opinion, visitors will have to adjust to a new, unexpected, non-authoritative stance, and it is the museum’s responsibility to help them see the difference and make that adjustment.”¹⁰

Curatorial Personalities

Finally, the question of who shall ultimately act as curator of the museum exhibition is now made clear by the foregoing discussion. It is clear that there shall arise multiple curatorial personalities from the framework of Exclusion-Inclusion in the particular context of the Higaunon in history. The anthropological broker is curator as facilitator and mediator rather than as single “curator-superstar.”¹¹ He is facilitator-mediator because he acts in mediation to produce the Higaunon vocalities of the exhibition. It is his supervision that sets the cooperative manner in the production of voice, to “keep things moving,” as it were.¹²

⁹ Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past, Power and the Production of History*. 1995, 23.

¹⁰ Serrell. 115

¹¹ O’Neill, Paul. *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*. 2012, 36.

¹² *Ibid.* 25

Writing and exhibit organizing are also curatorial works and these are the roles of the Higaunon. As such, they are in a direct act of creation and knowledge production. It is they who shall convey value to the exhibition as vital insiders. This effectively makes them agents responsible for narrative production, providing them the “curated by” credential.¹³

Curatorship becomes a dynamic process necessary to achieve the Inclusion of the Higaunon. Museums love to project indigenous peoples’ culture. Showcasing indigenous peoples in our museums, however, does not necessarily mean we are no longer treating them in post-colonial fashion. The Inclusion must stop.

Voice provides both a challenge to the concept of the traditional museum and an avenue for collaboration.

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¹³ *Ibid.* 32

