THE PROJECT OF NATIONALISM: CELEBRATING THE CENTENARY IN PHILIPPINES CONTEMPORARY ART

The celebration of the Philippine Centenary was a major event, particularly so because of the substantial funding provided for it by the national government as well as the establishment of a body, the National Centennial Commission (NCC), to oversee its programs over a two-year period. Activities commenced in 1996—the centenary of the beginning of the Philippines' revolution against Spanish colonial rule. Popularly known as the Philippine Centennial, 1898–1998, the biggest commemoration occurred on Independence Day, 12 June 1998.

The Philippine Centennial can be characterized as an event consisting of multiple nationalist projects and intersected by plural agendas. Ultimately its goal may be perceived as a reification of the belief in the nation-state. Nevertheless the nationalist projects were interpreted differently by the citizens of the Philippines whose allegiances are similar but whose practices are not. This makes for an interesting study regarding the effect of the Philippine centennial celebrations on the process of making art in the country's urban areas. More particularly, I am keen to see how representations of nationalist sentiments are reinforced through financial support as well as ritualized actions and occasions. In this essay, I will provide examples to support my notion of the ways in which stereotypes of images are re-contextualized and beliefs change despite the desire to fix them through political motivation and historical accounts. This is evident in works of art using national dress and the flag as the theme, motif, and inspiration. In addition, the Philippine Centennial can account for rehearsing anti-colonial nationalist narratives, and excluding other forms of nationalism.

Despite the rhetoric of anti-colonialism, the complex relationship of Filipinos with their former colonizer is still evident in the sense that some actions seem to glorify the Spanish presence in the Philippines. For instance, financial support from the NCC towards refurbishing public buildings influenced by Spanish colonial architecture created a wave of nostalgia among the elite, to the extent that they began renovating their ancestral homes in the provinces. Meanwhile, local researchers were determined to establish the Filipino agency in those Hispanic-
influenced buildings. Ambiguous colonial relationships are also evident in some contemporary artistic expressions found during the Philippines Centennial celebrations. While the official events waved the banner of patriotism as a naturalized aspect of being Filipino, these contrasted with the yearning to come to terms with the colonized past. This was made obvious by remembrances of key moments surrounding the declaration of independence in 1898, hence the frequency in NCC programs of re-enactments of events from a century ago. This is also prevalent in museum shrines of Philippine heroes: visitors are made to re-live the past through multimedia exhibitions. The search for an idiom to reconstruct pivotal moments of the nation's history seems crucial to arrive at an understanding of nation and national identity among Filipinos.

In a way, the official NCC events tried to narrow some of the possibilities of artistic expression to the extent of legitimizing mainly literal and hackneyed renderings of nationalism and national identity. Yet even in some of the narrower spaces of artistic discourse, interpretations were made in compelling ways, pointing to other possibilities of constructing images of Filipino identities.

FIGURES OF ART

Apart from the projects of the National Centennial Commission (NCC), other government institutions such as the Cultural Centre of the Philippines (CCP) and the National Commission on Culture and the Arts (NCCA) worked with the NCC on art exhibition projects. Among those at the CCP were the Igkas-Arte (Resilient Art) and Sining Sentenaryo (Centenary Art) exhibitions. At the NCCA galleries, a display of artists' interpretations of the Philippines flag entitled Watawat (Flag) was included in its many nation-wide programs. Many of these exhibitions were marked by monumental or installation works of art and tableaux of life-sized mannequins. Of the three I mentioned above, only Igkas-Arte was toured nationally (see figure 1).

FIGURE 1
Tableau of Pabasa (Singing the Passion of Christ), from the Igkas-Arte exhibition, Cultural Centre of the Philippines. Photographed by Julio Sambajon.
Private foundations similarly engaged in exhibition projects in collaboration with the NCC. The Art Association of the Philippines (AAP) called its annual art contest the Centennial National Painting Competition ’98. Held at the Museo ng Sining (Museum of Art) in Manila, the majority of prizes were awarded to Manila-based painters at the exhibition opening. This occurred despite the AAP’s first attempt to hold a national competition. On the other hand, the Metropolitan Museum of Manila (Met), organized an exhibition on a theme taken from a phrase of the national anthem, *Alab ng Puso* (Fire of the Heart)—perhaps to evoke the intensity of passion for nation. This phrase was interpreted by twenty-two Filipino contemporary artists in celebratory or critical works of art. Most of them conformed to the curatorial brief by creating massive or life-sized art pieces.

Not all exhibitions sought funding from the NCC, however. This demonstrates the desire of some groups to work outside the official framework of celebrating the centenary. For instance, the Far East Bank Company organized a national touring exhibition of art from its collection.³ Galeria Duemila, on the other hand, displayed human scale terra cotta sculptures by Julie Lluch at the art centre of a big shopping mall. These sculptures portray various representations of Filipino women as Lluch’s ode to the history of the Philippines and Filipino women’s responses to it. This is a remarkable project considering the competition of images from the commercial space of the mall. Even the NCCA used the same space to exhibit works of art for their self-funded project, entitled *Diwa ng Sining* (Soul of Art).

What is interesting in all these visual arts programs for the Philippine Centennial is the tendency for figurative images to take precedence over abstract or non-objective art. Produced mainly for the NCC project, most contemporary works of art were made in the likeness of human figures that stereotyped a particular Filipino iconography. For instance the depiction of figures with apparently Malay features and dressed up in Spanish-influenced costumes was common in old and contemporary works of art that were selected for exhibition. Moreover, the works of art were predominantly portraying a narrative of a dramatic historical event or an image of a hero of the revolution. Many artists tried to fit into the demands of commissions from the NCC. Among them was Bencab whose works in the last ten years have become increasingly symbolic images of Filipino women. In his last project—producing illustrations for a book on national hero Jose Rizal—Bencab’s figurative drawings became popular iconography for other artists working within the official centenary programs.

Most of the abstract art was limited to the theme of the Philippines’ flag, yet again reinforcing nationalist sentiments. The practice of depicting flags to connote devotion to nation is perhaps
uncharacteristic of non-colonized countries. However, in colonized countries, flag images have served to evoke patriotic feelings or make a work identifiable as a work by someone from that particular country. But as in any national flag it is the bearer of the people's, or community's, cultural-political project. Before the formation of nation-states, armies and guilds used banners. Symbols, such as coats-of-arms were super-imposed on cloth, metal, or wood. With the rise of nation-states, colours and symbols were standardized. Red, blue, and white, for example, symbolized libertarian ideals. The number of star emblems on flags signified states, provinces, dominions, and islands. It is interesting to note, further, how certain colours are grouped on a flag among a collection of countries within the same region. In contrast to flags found in Africa whose colours are principally green, white, and yellow, those in Southeast Asia are predominantly white, blue, and red. Among the works of art incorporating the Philippine flag theme in the centennial exhibitions, I found that the challenge for artists was to denote the flag distinctively as they applied it to their representational compositions.

Notably, as I will demonstrate in a later section, the artistic process of solving a pictorial problem using the elements from the design of the Philippine flag, serves to re-contextualize it. Rather than be constrained by constitutional restrictions imposed on the alteration of the flag, Filipino artists were able to make use of it more creatively. This has rendered the flag and its emblem open to interpretation beyond the confines of the official nationalist narrative as expressed by the NCC.

The emphasis of NCC projects on re-enactments of key moments in Filipino history may be understandable as they act as the representative of the nation-state and they alone can legitimize the authentic Philippine culture. There is tension, however, when there is disagreement over their interpretations compared with the interpretations of those on the ground or those who were excluded from participating in the official celebrations. Some artists believed they were not invited to exhibitions or did not win centennial-theme competitions because their work did not quite fit the standard artistic representations favoured by the NCC. Others presume they just did not have the right connections and therefore could not negotiate for grants or commissions.

Critics have suggested that methods used by the NCC may be likened to strategies employed by the Spanish colonizers. Eventually, the natives of the Philippines appropriated the same strategies to benefit themselves. A discussion of Philippines' contemporary art, especially one that connects rather directly to Spanish colonial art and its practices, is not complete without considering the response of converted Filipinos to religious art. The Roman Catholic Church has exerted influence over Philippine
State policies that affect people's lives up to the present. What is interesting even with these constraints, however, is the creativity of the Filipinos' ripostes. Historian Vicente Rafael, citing Reynaldo Ileto, claims that religious conversion was used by the Spanish to gain control over the colony. He notes:

Religious conversion was crucial to the consolidation of Spanish power in the Philippines. But as Reynaldo Ileto has convincingly shown, Catholicism not only exercised a profound impact on the patterning of notions of authority and submission in colonial society; it also furnished the natives with a language for conceptualizing the limits of colonial and class domination. The idiom of religious conversion was crucial, then, for this reason: it shaped the terms of native surrender just as it lent itself to the articulation of popular resistance to a colonizing power.

In this sense, the introduction of European painting to the Philippines through religious art offered a vocabulary and a way of articulating something Filipino in a new idiom, allowing them to imagine themselves as visually empowered. This empowerment would have begun when local artists were allowed to paint without restrictions from the church, following an edict from the Spanish king Carlos III, in 1785. As Villegas disclosed:

Previously, the clergy treated religious art almost as a monopoly, commissioning works which they took care of distributing. Deregulation of their art permitted artists to paint for a larger market, paving the way for the development of secular art.

This promoted opportunities for artistic expression, to chronicle events, and, more importantly, to gain economic advantage. Whereas in the past local artists were limited by having to work within the confines of church patronage, the secularization of art created other prospects for representation. Artists found other ways of constructing their images, much less hampered by ecclesiastical requirements of faithfully copying European models. As a result, more artists developed painting skills that satisfied the demands of a new economic class.

Members of this class engaged in vigorous commercial trade and travel in the 1860s after the opening of the Suez Canal. The shorter route also meant that luxury goods such as art materials and European works of art were more quickly transported.

Among those who developed their painting skills locally were Vigan-based Esteban Villanueva and Manila-based Simon Flores. Self-taught painter Esteban Villanueva (1798–1878) was commissioned by the colonial government to document pictorially the Basi Revolt. He created fourteen scenes that featured the uprising in the Ilocos region during the early nineteenth century. The revolt ensued after the colonial government imposed a monopoly on wine manufacturing. Presently housed in the Burgos Museum in Vigan, Ilocos Sur, the Villanueva paintings have been widely cited during the Philippine Centennial both as a chronicle of social transformation and an early example of
'Filipino' artistic expression. Simon Flores, on the other hand, enjoyed patronage from the new elite to do commissioned portraits. Having studied painting with academically-trained Spanish teachers at the Academia de Dibujo y Pintura* (Academy of Drawing and Painting) in Manila, Flores gained a steady clientele, many of whom are represented in his paintings formally dressed and surrounded by luxurious interiors. Like Villanueva's paintings, Flores' oil portraits have survived time and tropical conditions. They are presently held in a few museums and personal collections, frequently cited during the centenary celebrations as vivid manifestations of Filipino artistry. Figurative painting particularly has enjoyed contemporary patronage for its ability to elicit nostalgia for the primordial past and incipient nationalism.

SARTORIAL CENTENNIAL

What is more important in the process of reification of a nationalist ideology is the relocation of artists such as Villanueva and Flores in Philippine art history. Devices that call attention to them, such as exhibitions and textual citations, have made it expedient to think about the many possible images that they selected to paint. Both of them, for instance, chose to depict their subjects with dignity. These were residents of the Philippines of mixed ancestry who were usually victims of colonial discrimination. At that time, the 'pure Spanish' or españoles peninsulares, were considered at the top of the racial echelon. Forms of clothing seem to be the best device to identify the artists' subjects—dress, like other aspects of everyday life, constructs the identities of the wearers. As Tarlo suggests:

Like other social phenomena, clothes are often dehistorical, naturalized, converted to myth... Yet at the same time they are detachable, thereby denying the very permanence they sometimes seem to suggest. They are both part of us and superfluous to us. What this suggests is not that clothes have any particular meaning, but that their peculiar proximity to our bodies gives them a special potential for symbolic representation.

The visual presence of special clothes during the Philippine Centennial celebration was partly the result of a policy enforced in most government offices. Apart from allowing occasions to dress up, employees had to wear characteristic Filipino costume. Unlike the male national costume that has been used as business attire, women's clothes departed from the traditional gala dress to allow them more freedom of movement to carry out their work.

For the men, the uniform required every Monday was the formal Barong Tagalog (or Tagalog Shirt)—a long- or short-sleeved shirt made out of transparent material, split at the sides up to the waist and buttoned at the front. Men wear this shirt hanging outside the trousers with a vest underneath. Sometimes the front of the shirt is embroidered with a design in a
neutral colour similar to the shirt (i.e. ecru or pale blue).

The women's costume, known as Baro’t Saya (Blouse and Skirt) may vary but customarily involves a loose white or ecru embroidered, transparent blouse over a slip. This is worn with a long printed or plain skirt. Although less formal looking than the Terno, the Baro’t Saya is more comfortable for office wear. The Terno is still considered the archetypal national dress and has also evolved through the years from a five-piece heavily starched costume (as depicted in many nineteenth-century paintings and prints) to a one-piece butterfly-sleeved long gown. The authenticity of this national dress is demonstrated by its display during official state functions when it has been worn by the wives of the Philippines’ presidents. Former First Lady Imelda Marcos popularized the Terno by wearing it consistently during her husband’s term of office. This national costume is worn exclusively by the upper class and beauty contestants rather than by Filipino women in general. Apart from the restrictive construction of the Terno, the favouring of the Baro’t Saya as popular Centennial costume satisfies the requirement of a ‘Filipiniana’ dress. Moreover, since the Terno seems to be closer to colonial-style clothes, the Baro’t Saya fits the anti-colonial sentiment consistently expressed during the Centennial celebrations. In this sense the enforcement by official policy to wear Filipiniana has brought about a process of negotiating a standard form of dress. By insisting on wearing the Baro’t Saya, female government employees were directly involved in the process of reconsidering what constitutes the national dress.

These forms of dress were popularly known as Filipiniana—a term that is rich in irony because, although it is patterned after a European style of colonial dress, it is restructured to suit local residents’ bodies. Towards the end of the centenary celebration, the term Filipiniana was eclipsed by the widely-used ‘Centennial’ to denote the national dress. Centennial clothes were still only worn on special occasions because of their impractical design and because they were antithetical to the modern, everyday clothes that most Filipinos have become accustomed to wearing.

The negotiation over national dress was also taking place in the art exhibitions for the Centennial commemoration. I have observed a correlation between images from historical paintings and the promotion of national costume in, for example, the display of nineteenth-century paintings and prints by the Far East Bank for its national touring exhibition which seems to suggest that the choice of images was more than incidental. The organizers of the exhibitions may, perhaps, have selected works of art that depicted costume they deemed to be Filipiniana to stereotype a look that contributed to a particular Filipino iconography. Yet despite the tendency to use this criterion for other
exhibitions, contemporary artists found different ways of evoking them, particularly in some of the artists' use of cloth and clothing as metaphors for constructing their own notions of national identity and expressing their anti-colonial sentiments.

In the *Alab ng Puso* exhibition at the Met, artists Brenda Fajardo, Ana Fer, and Pacita Abad, among others, incorporated cloth or clothing into their art. Fajardo dressed her central figure in a form of traditional peasant women's costume (a variation of the *Baro't Saya*)—the loose top painted white and the skirt, red—to signify Mother Land. In her insistence to dress Mother Land in *Baro't Saya*, Fajardo conveys her adherence to it as the true national dress (see figure 2).

Fer, on the other hand, chose to depict her cast of major characters of the revolution by painting them with identifiable features and costumes that may have resembled them in real life—their colonial clothes, as well as bearing, typify the historical visual accounts of these heroes. By featuring them in such clothes, Fer goes beyond creating stereotypes. She instead appropriates the clothes as a fashion statement, expressing the individuality of those heroes, as isolated as their life-sized cardboard cut-out, making them stand out from the rest despite their typical colonial costume (see figure 3).

Unlike these two artists, Abad chose to stitch together and paint pieces of cloth from different parts of the Philippines, creating an installation piece that resembles a Muslim wedding tent prevalent in southern Philippines. As a monument (at fifteen feet high and fifteen feet wide) to her twenty-year collection of
cloth, as well as to the fabric of the Philippines' life, she has put together an assemblage that renders the tentative veil of embroidered, transparent Centennial costume pale. It is a canopy of Abad's aspirations as she celebrates '100 Years of Freedom', claiming the cloth monument as a national emblem that encompasses cloth designs from all over the country. Further, by putting the pieces of cloth together as a Muslim wedding tent, Abad contends that culture was very much alive before the Spanish 'discovered' the Philippines, since Islam antedated Christianity by centuries (see figure 4).

In the examples above, the artists have defined and recast cloth and clothing to represent their idea of Filipinos as a social group, revealing how our minds are programmed to express something through cloth. Thomas Carlyle, the nineteenth-century British intellectual, sardonically reflected on this idea through his creation, the German philosopher of clothes, Herr Teufelsdröckh in Sartor Resartus. He remarks:

Teufelsdröckh undertakes no less than to expound the moral, political, even religious Influences of Clothes; he undertakes to make manifest, in its thousandfold bearings, this grand Proposition, that Man's earthly interests 'are all hooked and buttoned together, and held up by Clothes.' He says in so many words, 'Society is founded upon Cloth'.

**Figure 3**
Ana Fer; Mga Panauhing Pandangal (Guest of Honour). Photographed by Dick Baldovino.
FLAG FETISH

Apart from clothing, another way by which cloth has been assembled to symbolize national identity is through flags. Unlike Abad's desire to have a truly national flag by incorporating other pieces of cloth in her patchwork tapestry, the standard colours of the Philippines officially represents the nation. A national flag is a prime example of cloth where a fixed image cannot be altered. The Philippines' flag is perhaps unique among the world's flags because it can be reversed to change its symbolism. In times of peace, the blue half is displayed above its red half and turned around with the red above the blue if the nation is at war. The white triangular patch on one side holds a central golden sun with eight rays and three golden stars at each corner. This is designed so that no matter if the blue or the red is overhead, the triangle motif remains symmetrical.

Nowhere have I encountered such excessive devotion to the flag as in the Philippines where it is honoured with a ceremony involving standing at attention and singing the national anthem. This ceremony is usually held outside government offices on Monday mornings.
just before any theatre performance, and at the start of every last film show in cinemas. There is none of the sense of irony of wearing the emblem as the British are wont to do with the Union Jack.

The Philippines flag is a piece of cloth that cannot be transformed into clothing. To do so would be deemed a sacrilege to Filipinos. The flag is synonymous with patriotism and national reverence which is perhaps one reason why the Philippines' flag became an obvious theme in the centenary art exhibitions and competitions. Fifty of the 177 entries for the AAP Centennial Painting Competition used the flag as motif or source of the white, blue, and red libertarian colour scheme. Moreover, as I have mentioned above, the NCCA organized Watawat, an interpretation of the flag by art students from the University of the Philippines. Likewise, of the twenty-two artists featured in the Alab ng Puso exhibition, seven incorporated the Philippines' flag in their works of art, either as centrepiece or model.

One of the three monumental outdoor installation works for the Sining Sentenaryo exhibition was made by contemporary artist Junyee. For his 'Isang
Daan' (One Hundred), he set up 100 cloth flags inspired by the emblems of the revolution from 100 years ago. The red flags with huge, white KKK letters used during the Philippines revolt, distinguished the front lawn of the CCP, amid traffic, tall buildings, and a magnificent water fountain. Junyee also took the revolutionary flag indoors at the Met exhibition, Alab ng Puso. There he cut out coloured tissue paper flags and banners and then suspended them on stretched nylon strings high on the railings of the Met's upper chambers. Rather than be constrained by the earnest flag fetish subscribed to by the NCC, Junyee chose to use the revolutionary flag as jubilant heraldry, akin to festival streamers. It is interesting to consider whether his work would have elicited a more emotive response had he used the contemporary Philippines flag. Although he used a blurry image of it juxtaposed against the KKK flag in his winning AAP entry, 'Dako Roon' (Over There), he did so only to set off the opposite categories between past and present (see figure 5).

In this act of incorporating the flag, the artists did not just endorse the nationalist narrative of the Philippine Centennial celebration, they also involved in their works a more complex assertion of primordial unearthing of self. Junyee chose to use the revolutionary KKK flag to give him more space to explore the meaning of flag as a banner of nationhood based on revolt against the colonial power. He chose it from amongst the other flags known to exist at the time of revolution because of its ties with the first recorded successful uprising and its symbolism of the tragic consequences of assertion for independence. Andres Bonifacio, the renowned founder of the Katipunan organization, which the K in the flag stands for, lost his life during a bitter power struggle over its leadership. Nationalists consider him the embodiment of a true Filipino because they believe him to belong to the working class with few attachments to the mestizo (mixed blood) populations living in the Philippines.

Other artists preferred to use elements of the contemporary Philippines flag design in their work. Although it may seem that the motifs have become commonplace as a result of repetitive use of its colours and triangular design, the flag image's translation into other media represents a process of re-contextualization. The artists who used the elements from the present flag are, of course, subscribing to the accepted winning formula in order to gain centennial prizes and grants. But its transmission from standard cloth to oil, acrylic, or paper exonerates the artists from illegally altering the flag. The practice of painting, assembling, or sculpting the image of the flag perhaps changes the flag's significance more dramatically for the artists and consumers of the works of art than it would if it had just been seen displayed fluttering in its usual form.
The works of art made during and for the
centenary evoked the artists' efforts to get
at the heart of what, indeed, is a Filipino.
The pervasive images they constructed
comprise far more meaningful re-enactments than those devised by the
NCC. These repetitive acts of creation and
re-casting of images by visual artists are
linked to rituals of belief and becoming.

**FIXATION ON NATIONALISM**

Anti-colonial nationalism characterized
the totalizing narratives that ran through
official Philippine Centennial events.
Notwithstanding the lack of attention
from politicians and the mismanagement
of funds, the centenary activities
continued apace. These took place in
different parts of the Philippines as well as
in cities abroad that have big Filipino
expatriate communities. In this essay,
however, I have only taken into account
the Manila art exhibitions.

NCC-financed projects focused on an
official version of nation and nationalism,
with an assumption that all Filipinos must
share their patriotic beliefs. But ideas of
nationalism, like other aspects of people's
existence, are a product of a combination
different cultures to which different
people belong. The responses to
nationalism or its reconstruction in art
may be varied, contradictory, and subject
to negotiation. The state, through its
agents such as the NCC, tends to privilege
a type of art that represents an anti-
colonial nationalism over other types of
nationalism. In the Philippines the
precedent for this in art were the forms
promoted by the then President Ferdinand
Marcos and his wife, Imelda. During their
time, avant-garde Filipino art was given
state support through exhibitions,
museum spaces, and participation in
international art competitions to project
the conception of the new Filipino in the
New Society promoted by the Marcoses. Only those who fitted their requirements
were subsidized. This is true even today
although it might be argued that current
arts policy is much more constitutional.

The NCC's rather ambiguous criteria for
selecting particular types of art projects
allowed certain forms of tokenism to
develop—as long as they did not deviate
too much. For instance, in the outdoor
installations at the Sining Sentenaryo at
the CCP grounds, three artists were
selected to convey the banner-fluttering of
the celebration. Junyee's installation of
100 flags was given the CCP front lawn
rather than Sandra Torrijos's 'Templo ng
araw para sa Kalayaan' (Sun temple for
Freedom). Whereas Junyee's work of red
KKK flags set on diagonal bamboo poles
fitted the notion of action and
stereotypical revolutionary fervour,
Torrijos's was an art installation
solemnizing repose. Multicoloured poles
arranged in circular forms marked her
work and, although their colours are akin
to festival bunting, they are fixed as if
poised to honour the sun. Torrijos's
esoteric response to the curatorial brief
seems to presume that the question of
identity is larger than nationalism. But this
may have been too metaphorical for the NCC curators, so her installation was placed on a less prominent site at the CCP grounds. It contrasted with the usual emotional appeal of official national celebrations. This is an example where the NCC found it difficult to control the outcome of most of their visual arts projects despite the public and corporate funds at its disposal.13

Culture became part of the national agenda and was prominent in diplomatic exchanges, manifested in programs that sought to renew the nationalism of Filipinos. The 'official' celebration that was managed by the NCC has been criticized as more prosaic than imaginative. Critics claim that most of its projects appeared as worn-out as the legislated wearing of Centennial costume each Monday in some government offices, or as tired as the compulsion to pledge allegiance to the Filipino flag at every chance the NCC was able to impose. Reviewing the activities celebrating the centenary of the past two years, it may seem that the rekindled enthusiasm for nationalism beyond the confines of banal devices is nearly at hand. It did not help that the NCC insisted on monumentalizing fleeting moments in the history of the Philippines through reproductions and re-enactments.14 However, I would argue that the NCC did not have much control over most of their projects as many artists did not interpret the centenary celebrations according to the official version.

The NCC's supposed unimaginative programming, dissected and analysed in a number of Philippines' newspaper columns, created more controversy than the question of nationalism itself. Only a few journalists wondered about its anti-colonial basis. In the Philippines, nationalism and national identity are generally regarded as unproblematic and to dispute anti-colonial nationalism is incomprehensible to the cultural and political elite (such as those members of the NCC). It is usually construed as a mark of treachery or a sign of 'colonial mentality'. This is one reason why the performances and exhibitions for the centenary celebrations rehearsed anti-colonial sentiments. These activities featured what members of the NCC believe to be native Filipino practices, as distinct from colonial influences. Apart from the insistence on emphasizing Filipino agency in cultural production, such as in colonial architecture described above, certain arts activities were also selected on the basis of their identification as being primordial Filipino. This notion represents the Philippines as existing even before Spanish conquerors claimed the islands and named them, as a single entity, after King Philip II.

The discrepancy between historical accounts and local beliefs in the primeval nation created contradictions among Filipinos. These contradictions became sites of contest over rights, jurisdiction, and authenticity. The primordialists among the NCC members used the
arguing that indigenous groups who continued to engage in arts activities such as cloth-weaving and basket-making were evidence of the primacy of Filipino ingenuity over projects related to colonial civilization. Such an emotive postulation of a true Filipino culture was emphasized in most of the official centennial activities rather than an alternative conception of a Filipino identity that changes through time and whose authenticity is validated by practice and negotiation. For instance, the re-enactments were almost always focused on the martyrdom of national heroes who fought for the right to become Filipinos. This seemed to uphold ideas that authentic Filipinos were born in the Philippines and could trace their roots among local indigenous groups. This appropriation contradicted the earlier label that Filipinos were the Spanish-born.

While the designation 'Filipino' has been taken for granted by citizens of the nation-state, it also brought into focus their differences in defining what is Filipino. Those in the lowland, Christian, and urban areas share ideas of being Filipino because of access to provisions made by the nation-state such as national universities and museums. On the other hand, those who live on the fringes far from access to those provisions have a more ambiguous image of themselves as Filipinos, tending, rather, to identify with their village or region. The Philippine centennial celebrations grew in importance at a time when Muslim groups in the south were pushing for secession and highland groups in the north remained indifferent to the nation-state.

The activities of the NCC expressed the desire for, rather than represented, a united nation. Anti-colonial sentiments seem to have fed into anti-colonial nationalism where official centennial celebrations insist upon a common Filipino history of war and oppression. The pledge of allegiance to the Filipino flag and the singing of the national anthem reinforce anti-colonial nationalism. As a result of this, the effort to assert the greatness of the Filipino remains pressing and expresses an aspiration to leave the marginal position of a former colony and enter the mainstream of national sovereignty. Yet Filipino identity remains for the moment a provisional condition where different definitions are constantly re-assessed and validated, like different sets of clothes being tried on until the majority finds one that fits all. In the process it is popular practice to raise the regard for Filipino culture at the expense of putting down other cultures, such as those of the Europeans. This may be perceived as a problem of insularity where the process of identity-formation is centripetal and colonialism is dismissed as an event rather than a process. Alternatively, it could also be seen as a strategy implemented while other methods of defining national identity remain elusive.

Although the NCC agenda of instilling patriotic fervour among the citizens of the...
Philippines nation-state was emphasized, it was nevertheless construed in a number of 'unofficial' ways. The art exhibitions and competitions are evidence of artists' perceptions of their identities—national as well as those other elements that make up identities of persons, including gender, age, and ethnicity. The artists challenged figurative representation to the extent of resuscitating stereotypes from the past. As I have shown in this essay, the Filipiniana/Centennial costume and the flag were two of the most favoured templates and inspirations. These were then reconstructed as an act of remembering and re-creating—much like Pacita Abad's cloth assemblage to fabricate a familiar, yet different, art form.

Art historian Patrick Flores analyses the power of artistic activity over other homologous political and cultural enterprises that are usually considered teleological. He observes that:

The act of painting constitutes not only a redescription of a world, but a certain world, a certain body of work and body politic. In itself a transformation of material into visual presence, it sets the condition of possibility of a world, and its world-ing in art. Art, however, makes sense only in the performance of its identity, in the manner in which it instantiates a determinate though reflexive practice of aesthetic education.15

In a sense, the NCC activities were part of a series of consensus-gathering activities designed to reify their official definition of a Filipino identity. Fortunately, the wall of nationalist discourse was rendered porous which enabled ideas to flow. These, in turn, provided the tension for renegotiating identities. Just like historian Vicente Rafael's assessment of religious conversion during Spanish colonialism, the official NCC celebration unintentionally devised a new idiom for contemporary Filipinos to re-contextualize symbols of their identities through current practices and interpretations. Visual artists and even government employees who had to wear Centennial costumes every Monday sought ways to express their interpretations of what celebrating the centenary meant to them. On some occasions, such as group art exhibitions, there seemed to be a contingent consensus on what constituted Filipino national identity relative to the official NCC events. Most of the time, however, individuals brought forward tentative ideas of national identity that depended, in each case, upon their degree of access to the nation-state. In re-casting the elements of the national flag into works of art and assembling the Filipiniana costume into a contemporary Centennial ensemble, producers of this redefined cloth and clothing were able to imagine themselves as part of a nation.16 Their common identity was found not just on the basis of possessing similar forms of cloth but in an act of creativity during a propitious period of Filipino history. This may serve as a shared experience that will, in turn, lend itself to more meaningful acts of reproducing a national thread, linking other aspects of the identities of Filipinos.
Bodies, memories, and body memories coincide to re-map agendas and ideologies. Seventeenth-century mathematician Blaise Pascal presaged the question of identity by looking into beliefs and practices. He observed that:
  
  we are as much automatic as intellectual; and hence it comes that the instrument by which conviction is attained is not demonstrated alone. How few things are demonstrated! Proofs only convince the mind. Custom is the source of our strongest and most believed proofs.\(^7\)
  
The Philippine Centennial celebration was distinguished by its use of local customs to rededicate the faith of Filipinos in a nation that is still in the process of defining its identity or identities. Its ambiguous position geographically (part of both Southeast Asia and the Pacific) and politically (neo-colonial and independent nation-state) may be deemed to be part of its strength but also its weakness. Yet we are reminded that the celebration of the Philippines’ centenary, as well as the art exhibitions and competitions that accompanied it, were provisional compared to other practices in the Philippines. More significantly, they were secondary to the more important everyday activities of minding oneself and forging relationships with others. \(^\sim\)

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NOTES

1 I did not see most of the exhibitions cited in this essay as I was abroad on study while the activities for the centenary celebration took place. My data comes from interviews, photographs, and exhibition catalogues, some of which I cite here.

2 This exhibition was accompanied by a book Nicanor G. Tiongson (ed.), Igkas-Arte: The Philippine arts during the Spanish period (Manila: Sentrong Pangkultura ng Pilipinas and Agencia Española de Cooperación (AECI), 1998).


7 This is a contemporary interpretation of Villanueva’s national identity. During his time, those identified as Filipinos were actually Spaniards who were born and bred in the Philippines. Villanueva was believed to be of mixed blood and thus belong to the mestizo category. Patrick Flores, ‘Painting as Colonial Reconversion’, in ’98 Cien Años Después (Valencia: Generalitat Valenciana, 1998), for a discussion of Villanueva’s Basi Revolt paintings.
The first school of art in Manila, the Academia de Dibujo, was founded by Damian Domingo in 1823.


At a museum conference in Manila in October 1997, a spokesperson of the NCC actually gave these as reasons for the NCC's inability to meet project targets. See Amando Doronila, 'Still Nothing to Show for the Centennial', Philippine Daily Inquirer, 14 November 1997. While writing this essay, a senate investigation hearing is underway.


At the time of this writing, the NCC was just about to end its term. There are not enough figures available to estimate the amount of public and corporate funds spent on centennial projects. The Clark Expo Project alone reportedly cost one billion pesos (or A$39,370,000).

Shrines of Filipino heroes have been refurbished as a result of massive funding from the NCC. Criticisms have been hurled at the NCC and the National Historical Institute for allegedly tampering with these hallowed spaces. These include the arrangements of displays based on fashionable museum designs with little thought being given to Filipino museum visitors' preferences and practices.

Patrick Flores, '98 Cien Años Después, p. 298.

I owe this concept to Benedict Anderson's notion of nationalism as a modern phenomenon, focussing on it as a mode of political imagination. See B. Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism (London: Verso, 1983).