

# Mythopoeia and Communal Subjectivity: Mistranslations of Mythology in Philippine Popular Culture<sup>1</sup>

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MYTHOPOEIA REFERS TO the creative use of folkloric—specifically, mythological—material in any of the contemporary arts.<sup>2</sup> Examples of it abound nowadays: from books, graphic novels, television shows, to independent and mainstream cinema.

In this short paper, I will examine contemporary mythopoetic appropriations—focusing on a particular filmic one, from two years ago, and unpack it for its “misuse” of its chosen mythological text.

In sum, this misuse emerges out of a mistranslation of the past in presentist terms. In particular, what artists generally fail to appreciate is the fact that the theory of subjectivity underlying our contemporary reality is simply different from that which animated oral cultures, as a whole.

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1. This paper was originally delivered by the author as a lecture at the Abraham Sarmiento Hall, University of the Philippines, Baguio, on April 4, 2018.

2. The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists a recent use (2015) of mythopoeia to refer to Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* books. See *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, “mythopoeia,” accessed 2 February 2018, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/235084?redirectedFrom=mythopoeia#eid>

A key idea in my unpacking of this conceptual slippage will be the communal—as opposed to the individualistic—model of the self that operated in oral societies, and that literacy has effectively dismantled and supplanted.

The film I will be discussing is Roderick Cabrido's *Tuos*.<sup>3</sup> Starring the one and only superstar, Nora Aunor, it was one of the most anticipated entries in the Cinemalaya Festival of 2016.

But first, allow me to begin with a discussion of what myth is.

A form of oral lore or orature, myth is said to have provided humanity with one of its oldest intuitions of the spiritual and the sacred realms. It's been said that once a mythological system has turned dominant, it turns into a religion. According to this definition, only "other" people suffer from the "false" belief that is myth. In truth, however, it is religion that is a smaller subset of mythology, inasmuch as all religious systems are mythological in their most basic function.<sup>4</sup>

"Masks of God"—this is how Joseph Campbell, one of the foremost comparatists in the field, has called myths.<sup>5</sup> He meant with this description to emphasize the point that myths are worldly expressions whose ultimate allusion is transcendent. They are metaphors that paradoxically unify the temporal and the eternal.

Mythology informs both the rituals and the symbols that cultures have created in order to understand human existence in all its stages: birth, childhood, adulthood, hate, love, parenthood, old age, and of course, death. Myths are, from this perspective, not false at all. They are, rather, about accessing the knowledge and experience of the deepest kinds of truth.

The referents of mythological heroes are individuals who have lived distinguished lives in the societies that gave birth to these stories, but it is less their exterior than their interior realities that these ancient stories discuss.

These heroes all undergo the same prototypical journey, that begins with their needing to leave their respective worlds, usually with the help of spiritual gurus or guides.<sup>6</sup> They set out to follow their bliss, which they know to be the source of all life. In the process they are initiated into the rituals of adulthood and are transformed.

At the end of their journeys they all must return to their homes, bringing with them the "elixir" of existence, which is nothing if not a new and transformative

3. *Tuos*. Digital feature film, directed by Roderick Cabrido (Manila: Cinemalaya Films, 2016).

4. For an overview of these definitions of mythology, see Robert A. Segal, *Myth: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

5. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1949), 31.

6. These descriptions of mythology may be sourced from the works of Joseph Campbell, especially the following: *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*; *The Power of Myth* (New York: Anchor Books, 1991); and *Thou Art That: Transforming Religious Metaphor* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2001).

consciousness. All myths thematize the idea and practice of sacrifice—the immolation of one’s own ego—achieved through the various revelations that tribulations necessarily confer upon the hero or the journeyer.

Aside from the mystical, mythology functions in other ways. It is descriptive, too, like science is, representing reality’s sundry shapes and forms. Unlike science, however, mythology recognizes the truth that, in principle, reality cannot be completely apprehended—not by language nor by any of its constructions.

Myths are also pedagogical, in the sense that they embody and proffer didactic wisdom, which helps the members of the communities that produced them to live under a variety of conditions.

Related to this is mythology’s function to stabilize the social order in which it exists. This final function is what makes myths local and culture-bound. We need to add here that the problem with literalist readings of mythology is that they reduce it to this sociological function, to the exclusion of mythology’s more important symbolic (and spiritual) roles.

Indeed, in our world today, the task of mythmaking has been picked up by the artists, whose highest calling is to bring their audiences into a consciousness of the transcendent Truth that underpins all reality.

All great art is ultimately mythological in its character. The “making sacred” of the world—its mythologizing—is one of the primary tasks of the modern-day artists who, like their wizened predecessors, utilize their media’s different elements in order to provide their audiences contemporary and interesting paths to mystery and the Divine.

Not so much thematically as formally does the art of our day and age accomplish this singular objective. Even without the traditional epic ideas, art’s formal sensuousness—its shapeliness—reveals to us its transcendent quality as a kind of radiance that mirrors our own desired order and harmony.

And so, myths provide guides to the world—rather than depictions of it. In this sense they express hopes and aspirations rather than simple representations of the real. Nowadays, mythic narratives—of personal triumph against adversity, of social revolutions and radical change, of heroic ingenuity and innovation in the face of overwhelming odds—abound, and they are proving necessary, still and all, despite or precisely because of the ascendancy of science. All these inspirational stories are myths, and they continue to influence the lives of countless people in our world.<sup>7</sup>

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7. That modern-day societies still subscribe to such mythological stories has, of course been the argument of the historian, Mircea Eliade. A summary of Eliade’s contributions to the study of myth may be found in Segal 2004, 53-60.

The enduring relevance of mythology is that it is practically indistinguishable from creativity: the ultimate ambition of artist and creators in general is for their works to turn into myth, which is the superlatively fictive status to which all literature, all art, aspires.

Mythology is the creation of powerful stories that resonate both individually and communally—stories that provide not so much explanations as visions of humanity’s innermost and uppermost aspirations, the intuitions of its transcendent truth, without which it would be impossible to live *and be* in this world, in a fully human sense.

The creative deployments of mythopoeia—which is to say, the artistic appropriation of myths for whatever purpose in whichever genre—may take the shape of poetic retellings, fictional adaptations, dramatizations, historical fantasies, etc.

There are, to my mind, two kinds of mythopoetic projects, which are really aesthetic modes. We may refer to the first mode as ironic, and this aesthetic treatment is typically exemplified by camp or parodic narrativizations involving mythological heroes or heroines (as well as villains). An example that immediately comes to mind is Carlo Vergara’s uproariously funny graphic novel, *Zsazsa Zaturannah*,<sup>8</sup> whose story implicates both the native belief in amulets or *anting-anting*, and the modern mythos of comic-book-generated, big-breasted superheroines.

On the other hand, ready examples of earnest mythopoetic work are commonly seen in the *fantaseryes* on primetime television or the heroic fantasy films (mostly historical, but sometimes also futuristic) that normally show in local cinemas during the holidays. Just now, what may immediately come to mind is the hugely popular but initially controversial teleserye, *Bagani*, with its consumer-friendly pastiche of superficial (mostly Orientalist) mythological imagery, that obviously doesn’t wish to aspire to any kind of empirical accuracy or “authenticity” in the least.

Because myths are metaphorical figures for transcendent mysteries, the best suggestion we can give to writers who seriously wish to undertake their own respective mythopoetic projects is, first and foremost, to bear in mind that a metaphor, being a figure of speech about resemblance and paradoxical unity, is composed of two elements: a vehicle and a tenor. While the former is easy enough to identify in one’s reading, we must remember that the latter, being in truth the very heart or message of the myth, is always a matter of interpretation.

It is in this sense that mythopoetic retellings will always be subjective: the

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8. Carlo Vergara, *Ang Kagila-gilalas na Pakikipagsapalaran ni Zsazsa Zaturannah* (Manila: Visual Print Enterprises 2005, 4).

message or the “truth” of the myth being channeled (or utilized) is always, in fact, an intimate and personal one, although it’s crucial for the writer to also realize that it is precisely this message that ultimately takes precedence over the contingent vehicle, which indeed can be adapted, revised, rewritten, and transformed.

Mythopoeia’s transformative process can of course either resonate or not resonate. Especially where the artistic intent includes cultural recuperation or heritage conservation, the best way to avoid mistranslating or misappropriating myths in the process of contemporizing or adapting them would be to more responsibly understand the complexity of its sociocultural context. Hence: to appreciate their full-bodied truth in the mystical, descriptive, pedagogical, and sociological senses.

This is where our reading of Cabrido’s film comes in.

*Tuos* is an earnest, beautifully shot, but conceptually flawed mythopoetic film, set in the mountain fastness of central Panay, where the Karay-a-speaking Panay Bukidnon people live. The story centers around the characters of an aging binukot, the grandmother Pinailog, and her granddaughter and heir apparent, the teenaged Dowokan.

As the appointed time nears for Dowokan’s initiation into the role of their village’s binukot or “kept maiden” (the repository of their community’s ancestral knowledge), the conflict between tradition and modernity, the old and the young, comes to the fore: the boy-infatuated Dowokan wants to lead her own life, and not simply accede to the privileged but solitary existence that’s been decreed for her by the village elders. She willfully sleeps with her boyfriend and therefore violates the pact that her people have immemorially kept with the spirits of their land, and as a consequence her grandmother needs to confront the malevolent specter that the binukot tradition has served to appease.

This is an affecting film that aspires to authenticity by, among other things, worlding itself in the haunting upland environs of the Panay Bukidnon people, and by interspersing the narrative with the chanting of passages from *Tikum Kadlum*,<sup>9</sup> the first book in the ten-book epic saga of this indigenous community, currently being published, one volume at a time, by the University of the Philippines Press. It’s this book that ostensibly inspired this film’s writers, and while it undoubtedly commends this project in all sorts of ways, perhaps this is also where its fundamental problem lies.

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9. *Tikum Kadlum: Sugidanon of Panay, Book 1*, chanted by Federico Caballero and Teresita Caballero-Castor, and translated by Alicia P. Magos (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2014).

All the books in this epic corpus are interconnected, their characters forming genealogies that span several generations of heroes and heroines—and their adversaries.

This film's tone is fundamentally one of horror, reducing the character of the monster Makabagting to the role of a sex-starved and ravenous demon, because the price he exacts for the destruction of his sacred bamboo is the abduction of the offending datu's children. This may have indeed been in this book's story, but what this feature film ruinously foregoes is the crucial narrative detail that this monster takes the datu's daughters in order to give them to his spinster and childless sister, Amburukay, who raises them as binukot in a golden tower located inside her secret forest cave.

In other words, the epic's vision is complex, from the get go: while it recognizes duality (good and evil, for example), by blurring and "interimplicating" these opposites it may be said to ultimately yearn toward transcendence and unity. If only the writers had looked at the second book, they would have realized that, as against the outward evidence, Amburukay is far from villainous: she is actually the one who undergoes her own heroic journey (in search of a personal treasure—her golden pubic hair— that's been stolen from her by the thieving hero, Labaw Donggon), and reveals that her motives are kind and benevolent, despite the gruesomeness of her form (and so, this vision also urges a movement away from surface, toward depth). At the end of this book she abdicates all selfish claims and secures a good life for her two daughters—the peerless Matan-ayon and Surangga-on.

Tikum Kadlum is also not just a magical black dog who admonishes his master (the covetous Datu Paiburong) against cutting down the sacred bamboo in the middle of the enchanted forest: his role is echoed by other similar characters in the other books, for he articulates the taboo—the folkloric motif of the "one forbidden thing"—that is essential in many mythic stories, the transgression of which is inevitable because it is only through it that life's journey can commence. In myth as in modern fiction, stasis doesn't make for any narrative interest; a troubled paradise is the only paradise worth imagining or indeed "living" in.

Cabrido's film also disturbingly sexualizes the monster, which is another reductionism on one hand (not everything dark and mysterious needs to be eroticized), and on the other completely overlooks the fact that there is in this world a feminine monstrous (actually, primal) principle as well, Amburukay,<sup>10</sup> whose golden pubic hair embodies the pre-Christian idea of an entirely natural and precious sexuality. In the

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10. *Amburukay: Sugidanon of Panay, Book 2*, chanted by Federico Caballero and Leopoldo Caballero, translated by Alicia P. Magos (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2015).

series' second book, in her quest to recover it, she engages in an interesting ritual of humorous if slightly masochistic "self-intimacy": she squats on a rock by the river delta and ceremoniously slaps her vulva, which is supposed to produce a certain sound in avid response if the stolen hair is indeed located somewhere up that particular waterway. It may be difficult to imagine this now, from our perspective as Christianized lowlanders, but yes, in our archipelago there was a time when sexual matters could indeed be described so openly—and funnily—in the chanted epics and tales that both carried communal wisdom and functioned as the primary means of entertainment.

Finally, there's the matter of *tuos* itself—the film's lovely title—that pertains to the "pact" or "vow" between families in this preliterate world. In the absence of scripture, this people found a way of investing memory inside actual things—worldly objects that signified beyond their physical forms, whose radiance suffused their everyday existence.

This act of meaning-making was of a piece with their reverential attitude toward nature, that they knew was animated by the same Spirit dwelling inside themselves: thus, it cannot be a source of horror alone, but also of awe, rapture, gratitude, love, and all the other qualities that defined their humanity, which is coextensive with the divine.

It's important to remember that written words are signs as well, except that they have the tendency to stand apart from creation. This isn't the case with these natural and meaning-endowed objects, which abide fully inside their natural contexts even as they come to embody realities that refer to truths glimmering beyond their shapes.

We may therefore think of *tuos* as a kind of "mystical mnemonics," for a people whose consciousness is situational, sympathetic, and participatory, rather than abstract and individualistic. It's in this light that we can say that the *binukot* role is not primarily sacrificial and propitiatory (as against this film's erroneous claim): it makes sense within such a collective consciousness, in which the ego—if it could be said to exist at all—was always already subsumed into the communal self.

While this film's central drama is indeed a compellingly modern and relatable one—Dowokan coming into her own, and refusing to sacrifice herself in the name of tradition—what would have been a more interesting and dramatic story is just how she could have been "formed" so differently, as a subject, in contrast to the rest of her family. In other words, if her grandmother had been shaped by the stories of her past, what are the stories that shaped her consciousness: Did she go to a Christian school, where she read fairy tales? Had she seen Tagalog movies, with their wide-eyed stories of love against all odds? Just how thoroughly bilingual

is she, which would imply a split in her consciousness (already her dialogues are peppered with English and Hispanized words, which indicate an increasingly syncretized reality)?

And of course, literacy itself creates the individual subject, because reading/writing is a solitary experience, that repeats the reading/writing subject to herself, word after inwardly enounced world. Oral knowledges, on the other hand, have no real authors, and are by definition outward, communal, and performative. In several scenes we see Pinailog performing her binukot role, in earnest. While there could have been any number of dramatic ways to show Dowokan coming into her own as a modern “self,” sadly, this film barely touches on any of them.

We need to remember that the orality that constituted the form and substance of these myths efficiently served its purpose because this world was not remotely a nation in the modern sense: its idea of community was not so much imagined as ritually performed—each and every time the villagers gathered around the chanter to listen to the public performance of these tales, whose referents were identifiably themselves.

In other words, the self that the oral mind emanated from, enacted, and nourished was a communal and not an individual self. This was a self that interpreted its locality’s familiar stories in collectively performed and public ways. This was a self whose interest was inseparable from the interest of the community to which it belonged. Thus, oral subjectivity emerged out of a personalistic and mostly socially cohesive world, where interrelationships were directly mediated through elders and clan leaders, and where meanings were of necessity ritualistically performed and shared.

These epics in fact literalize and dramatize the communality of the epic psyche, in the ambiguous figure of Taghoy, a guru or spirit guide that intimates counsel to the hero or heroine, and provides them access to supernatural prowess. Taghoy speaks directly to the consciousness of these heroic figures, and thus reminds us that individuality in this epic world is not impermeable to the wisdom of the immemorial and broader community, and is therefore, strictly speaking, not individuality at all.

An obvious plot device—that may be said to move the heroic story along—the genderless and amorphous figure of this murmurous and grace-bestowing spiritual guide illustrates, very clearly that, for the ancient Panay Bukidnon, the private/public dichotomy that the solitary experience of literacy instantiates (and on which it subsequently comes to depend) isn’t intelligible in the least.

By contrast, our own present-day collective truth—which we call the nation—finds its cogency in its being imaginatively proposed across gulfs of diversity and numerousness. In its modern form the nation has flourished through the private and public experiences of literacy<sup>11</sup>—from Constitutions and nationally endorsed narratives, to newspapers and novels—negotiated as these have been through the emergence and eventual hegemony of print capitalism and all the imaginative and national-language-based literatures it has spawned.

The literate mind is necessarily individualistic: once again, we need to remember that reading/writing requires and deepens solitude and iterates the self to itself, instating and congealing its ontological separateness from others. The grand abstraction that is the nation can be envisioned as a community precisely through the imaginative faculty called empathy, which immersion in acts of literacy increasingly bestows.

And yet, despite or precisely because of such literate “individuations,” textual meanings within this episteme can be and indeed are stabilized, precisely because unlike the spoken word the written text is a portable artifact that can be passed on from hand to hand—from reader to reader—and stay more or less the same. Among other things the written text has come to embody a form of attentiveness and semantic uniformity that have allowed textual consciousness to explore syntactical structures that move past the iterative, additive, and conservative sentence patterns to which orality—if only to stanch and “organize” the ebb and flow of memory—is, of necessity, committed.

There are so many profound implications, therefore, in any artistic project that seeks to reference and embody the richness of our country’s ethnic diversity. Cabrido’s *Tuos*, while falling short of its promise, nonetheless deserves to be commended for the obviously well-meaning effort. Despite the linguistic hurdles, the performances are inarguably superb: by Aunor (as expected), and by the pretty and charming Barbie Forteza, who announces herself as a major new talent with this film. The “animated” sections are likewise memorable and visually beautiful, accompanied as they are by a hauntingly chanted score—by Bayang Barrios and Banaue Miclat.

A deft directorial hand is also clearly in evidence in so many of the village scenes, including a breath-taking panoramic shot of the mountain trail, as the infirm and diminutive grandmother is poignantly carried off inside a wicker basket down from her highland home to the hospital of the nearest town, which happens to be on the

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11. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

coast. There, with the help of modern technology (in the light of an electric bulb), she vanquishes the shadows of the rabid monster, and conceivably releases her granddaughter from the cruel and backward “pact.”

She is also shown finally walking into the sea—an unwittingly propitious and meaningful gesture, since the Panay Bukidnon’s epic world, as distinct from their landlocked real one, mostly revolves around the ocean. This reminds us how like most other indigenous peoples in our country, they must have been coastal inhabitants once upon a time, who were displaced and driven up- and inland by successive waves of conquest and Christianization.

Of course, we’re left delightfully heartened by Cabrido’s ultimate scene, a “meta” denouement that attempts to express his work’s self-reflexivity: the animated black dog—here, the emissary between the mythic and real worlds—walks across a progressively empty screen (that’s shown to be inside a small movie theater); soon enough it walks up to kiss the hand of a man sitting near where the camera (this scene’s point of view) is perched. The message homes marvelously in: storytelling is an unfinished human project, and cinema, like all art, aspires to the power of the loftiest story of all, which is myth.

Finally, the activity of engaging in mythopoeia bids us to see that reading and knowing about our folklore can be instructive of the immemorial oral habits of thought that persist in our own troubled time.

On one hand it may get us to appreciate the nondualistic and “unitarian” energies that inform our ancestral stories, in which social conflicts and dichotomies are recognized but also superseded and transcended for the sake of a realization of an underlying oneness. This is an insight that may be gleaned in a number of episodes in this epic series, where the conflict between hero and aggressor is resolved divinely and peacefully, by the mediation of the supreme matriarchal deity, Laon Sina, who invokes the lost memory of their shared ancestry, which indeed occasions a reconciliation.

As suggested by the works of our own eminent critics, didactic, agonistic, and “folk” (or communal) traces of oral forms may be said to powerfully endure even in our more “modern” literary and artistic texts—from novels, to poetry, to films. Because culture itself consists of attitudes and “habits of interpretation,” the work of these critics bids us to entertain the possibility that aspects of orality’s psychodynamics<sup>12</sup>—among others, the provisionality of memory, the “negotiability”

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12. The psychodynamics of the oral mind have of course first been spelled out by historian and philosopher Walter J. Ong in his important book, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1982).

of categories, the resistance against the procedure of abstraction, and the protraction of tactile and personalistic values that prevent intuitions of meritocracy from taking root—may themselves also be seen to animate the character of our national reality, whose hybrid cognitive state derives from the residual but entirely powerful effects of oral consciousness.

On the other hand, reading and knowing—writing and rewriting—about our mythological heritage can be instructive of the oral habits of thought that persist in our own troubled time. Our periodically revisable memory; the ease with which we can push categorical decisions aside in favor of regionalist or sentimental loyalties; our public yearning for heroic figures that manifests itself in our obstinately personality-oriented politics; even the populism that eschews careful and deliberate forms of critical thinking, proliferates information dumps and fake news and finds its home in the secondary or tertiary orality that approximates and conditions the distracted obliviousness of cyberspace (and all its “hypertextualities”): these are nothing if not the manifestations, or “symptoms,” of our residually oral present, whose wellspring is our powerfully oral and, in various syncretic ways, unfinished and continuing past.