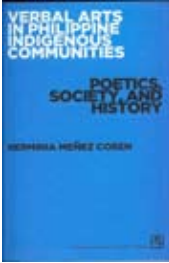


The Philippines



Herminia Meñez Coben, *Verbal Arts in Philippine Indigenous Communities: Poetics, Society, and History*

Manila: The Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2009. 402 pages. Softcover, \$19.50. ISBN 978-971-550-583-3.

HERMINIA Meñez Coben performs multiple roles in her book. First, she is a skilled archivist—by painstakingly recording and collecting various poetic performances in ten indigenous communities in the Philippines, she is able to transform the ephemeral and the verbal into permanent print. Having said this, I am not claiming a hierarchical and antagonistic relationship between oral and print cultures. In doing this archival function, Coben offers scholars in anthropology, folklore, performance studies, Philippine studies, and Southeast Asian studies a virtual repository of valuable cultural practices. Secondly, she is an excellent scholar of culture-in-action. She is able to provide the contexts in which these verbal arts are practiced, performed, and reproduced. Looking into the social and political organization, history, geography, and economy, Coben properly situates each group within its own specific collective experience. Finally, having pointed to the archival importance of this work, I want to stress that this book is not a non-theoretical and uncritical catalogue of practices or a list of who, what, where, and when, but rather a very ambitious analysis of persistent Southeast Asian island cultural themes and semantic issues that cut across particular genres, performances, and communities such as siblingship, gender, topography and place, and shamanic power.

Coben underscores the non-fixity of the verbal arts and the ways in which these cultural productions are active processes engaged with ongoing political, economic, and cultural struggles, and in many cases, are important media for social transformation and change. Indigenous poetry, which is part of oratory skills, is something that has been seen as an important ability and integral component of political and religious leadership. Benedict Anderson in his classic article about power in Javanese society showed how potency is embodied in oratory or verbal arts skills and is crucial in understanding local forms of authority. Together with Anderson and anthropologists such as Maurice Bloch, Coben ethnographically demonstrates the structural powers of the verbal arts. However, I would like to augment this typical reading with a different, albeit unorthodox, one.

I would like to depart from what would be a typical appreciation of a work such as this and go more broadly into the emotional and affective elements in the verbal arts. While Anderson, Bloch, and to some extent Coben have hinted at the energies propelled by the skillful deployment of verbal forms and meanings, they nevertheless have shied away from closer inspection of the emotional and affective ecologies and climates that precipitate from indigenous poetic productions or performances.

Coben's book opens up new ethnographic vistas for understanding the current scholarly focus on affect and emotion. Affect is a fascinating analytical category that allows for the recognition of the atmospheric effects of the sensorial—images, scents, sounds, and haptic experiences. It also provides a way of acknowledging bodily engagements that are not easily categorizable. Verbal poetic genres, particularly those about love, anger, and violence, are in fact vital and vigorous vantages for the conjuring of bodily affects and feelings. In fact, they are not literal positivist records of “social facts” but are indirect lyrical and expressive renditions of historical, cultural, and other social situations and are meant to persuade, entice, and draw listeners and/or an audience into the spirals of the poetic narrative. The reception of these indigenous poetic performances is dramatically more embodied than everyday speech. While recent scholarly literature in the humanities and the humanistic social sciences have pointed to the productive possibilities and potential of bodily knowledge through affect and emotions, most if not all have focused on Western-based media such as cinema, printed literature, and new media such as the internet, and very little attention has been given to cultural productions in indigenous communities. While this is not the author's overt or explicit intention, Coben's analysis enables a productive alternative interpretation of the mechanics of indigenous poetry as elements involved in the structuring of sentiments and the conjuring of ecologies of passions, sensations, and feelings. In other words, I am framing Coben's book as a grounded staging of processes and practices that render such ecologies and environments possible.

It may seem that this framework is inimical to Coben's project, but I would strongly argue that this appreciative though unconventional reading of her work still remains true to her most basic intent—to demonstrate that indigenous verbal arts are constitutive of cultural world-making. In sum, the richness of her data and the erudition of her scholarly grasp of enduring research questions such as those of potency and power in Southeast Asia will help in making this work an important source and research touchstone for Asian studies scholars for years to come.

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