

On Symbolic & Interpretive Anthropology

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In commenting on Geertz' "thick interpretation" as exemplified by his essay on the Balinese cockfight, I must confess that I am doing so in the light of Victor Crapanzano's critique, as well as Eric Wolf's "The Virgin of Guadalupe."

But I must also emphasize that while I was reading Geertz' essay, I already had vague questions in my mind about the validity of his interpretations; perhaps not as particular and studied as Crapanzano's, but questions nonetheless.

These were not the same questions I asked myself while reading Eric Wolf's "The Virgin of Guadalupe." There, I agreed with the interpretation of the author. I think that this was because, first, Wolf was able sufficiently, in a very compact way, to present the historical/political/economic background of his allegations about what the symbol of the Virgin Mary stood for; and second, even if he did not do so sufficiently, I as a Filipino reader could already understand what he was saying, my historical background being similar to that of the Mexicans.

I do not know if Wolf also subscribes to symbolic anthropology, of course. I only know that he worked with Julian Steward on the book **The People of Peru**, and the essay in question was placed in a compilation on the anthropology of religion, under a part on symbols in myths and rituals.

The point I would like to make is that I don't think symbolic and interpretive anthropology has to be as questionable as Geertz would make it. But if Geertz could be as careless and flippant as he was in describing the Balinese cockfight (which is how I think he did it) – he who is not in any way related to the Balinese nor has lived with them even just a quarter of his life (nor, perhaps, has studied them as much as Eric Wolf has studied Latin American cultures) – why don't I have a right to analyze the Filipino attachment to the Virgin Mary as a veiled representation of their matricentrism, a matricentrism that has been covered over, but insufficiently, by almost 500 years of Western colonial patriarchy?

I have been through at least one rite of Virgin-worship in the Philippines – the festival of Peñafrancia in Naga – and could describe that rite in detail. In fact, I participated in that festival as a video documentarist, and have more than twenty hours' footage (mainly interviews), as well as the edited material, to prove it. My footage shows a drunken male macho culture going gaga over a tiny (about one foot tall) dark brown native Virgin, trying very hard to get the flowers from the sides of the boat on which she rides, to curry her favor, to touch her dress, to be beside her, so that they may get well from some ailment, or receive her blessings. With some background on the *babaylan* culture that the Spaniards so drastically suppressed, couldn't one conclude that the worship of the Virgin Mary, in this instance actively pursued down-river by half-naked Filipino men, is a harking back to those times, times that have not found a closure in the Filipino consciousness because they never grew into the feudal-then-capitalist culture they have had to adopt for almost 500 years, this culture having been merely imposed on them?

If Geertz can do it, why can't I? Is it because I'm neither male nor Western?