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NARRATIVES OF ACTION AND IDENTITY IN CLOTH: THE TEXTILES OF HIGHLAND LUZON, THE PHILIPPINES¹

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Introduction

The textile artifact, although framed by its physical existence, is not an isolated entity, but functions as a vital part in the ongoing systems of society. By viewing the artifact as an actor with its own life history and with particular parts to play in every sphere of life's narrative, we are provided with an entry to discovering how both the textile object and the subject, its creator and user, collaborate to mutually define one another. To interpret fully the significance of textiles within their cultural context one must examine not only the artifact's physical qualities, its materials, techniques and design, but also, its patterns of movement, namely, its circulation and distribution.²

The interior mountainous area of northern Luzon, Philippines, known as the Gran Cordillera Central, is home to several distinct cultural groups who have had a long history of producing textiles for functional clothing, for gifts in ceremonial exchange and for trade. Anthropologist George Ellis (1981:227) states that these fabrics are "among the last remnants of an indigenous artistic tradition which flourished throughout the area, preserving traditional pattern systems and articulating the values of society." All aspects of cloth production, the cotton cultivation, the spinning, the dyeing and the backstrap loom weaving are the responsibility of the women, and girls learn to weave from their mothers from approximately ten years of age.

Previous artifact-based literature on highland Luzon textiles focused principally on technology and taxonomy describing and classifying only the cloth's formal characteristics, namely, weaving techniques (Lambrecht 1958) and regional styles (Vanoverbergh 1929). A change in the direction of such research here is overdue.

Utilizing the early 20th century striped textiles of highland Luzon as a case study, this paper argues that the textile artifact is utilized according to formal principles of order through which it communicates information to the members

¹ This paper has been developed for the Textile Society of America from an earlier paper presented by the author at the Canadian Council for Southeast Asian Studies Conference, November 1991.

² Vastokas' work on Lithuanian woven sashes inspired my own application.

of the community. As a means of communication, the artifact then functions in a dialectical relationship with other cultural forms relaying information through similar channels. By examining the arenas of textile movement, the character of this code may be made visible since cloth circulation occurs within the context of meaningful social events.

Archaeological theorist Ian Hodder (1989:xiv) maintains that the creation and use of an artifact does not just reflect an existing actuality in society, but helps to bring that actuality about as the artifact represents a tradition with its own "historical continuity and independent dynamic" (cf. Spooner 1986:220). Its vital performative role in cultural processes takes the form of a continual interplay between objects and social strategies; artifacts are for him "symbols in action," agents in economic and social relations that "play an active part in forming and giving meaning to social behaviour" (Hodder 1982:55,85). As such, the artifact acquires levels of meaning for both its producers and users because of the cultural significance of what is done with it. Through this participatory process, the cloth communicates its information, performing in the capacity of what anthropologist Brian Spooner (1986:200) calls a form of "cultural elaboration."

Ana Llamazares (1989:342) maintains that in societies without phonetic writing, other forms of graphic representation become particularly important "for the transmission and preservation of certain ideas." Annette Weiner (1985:211) agrees that the object as an interactive agent in pre-literate societies comprises the major means of ensuring the continuity of social order and reproduction for their inhabitants, thereby fulfilling a pivotal role. Indeed, the American philosopher John Dewey maintains that there are non-verbal meanings of things "that present themselves directly as possessions of the object which are experienced" (1958:83). Moreover, as an information system, the artifact to be totally understood relies on the existence of a human group, a society which creates it and actively uses it in a variety of spheres.

Economic anthropologist Igor Kopytoff (1986:67) maintains that each object has a life history of its own: the object is created, imbued with the aesthetic mark of its producer and continues to live out a life as a meaningful expressive entity in social and economic spheres (cf. Clifford 1988). By being utilized in varying situations, the artifact holds and communicates a particular meaning for the subjects with whom it interacts. Indeed, an examination of each stage of the textile's career reveals its performance as multi-dimensional.

Working from unpublished field notes, archival photographs and early twentieth century ethnographies, I contend that textiles in pre-literate, pre-capitalist societies such as those of early 20th century highland Luzon, may in fact participate as both a commodity in trade and payment transactions and as a

metaphor in rites of passage and gift exchange. Functioning in both capacities, the cloth makes visible aspects of a society, its cultural principles, categories and strategies, which might otherwise remain obscure.

The textiles under examination are representative examples of the most common types of early twentieth century striped textiles produced by each Cordillera weaving group. They include men's loincloths of the Ifugao, Kankanay and Gaddang; Gaddang men's jackets; women's skirts of the Ifugao, Kalinga and Gaddang; ceremonial blankets and funeral blankets made by the Bontoc, Ifugao and Kankanay.

The studies that have examined the circulation of textiles in small-scale societies have tended to treat the performance of the commodity and that of the metaphor as mutually exclusive spheres. The analyses most often follow the metaphoric path adhering to the spirit of Mauss's (1966:10) classic work *The Gift*. Here, through reciprocal exchanges, the object being exchanged represents more than a product of human labour; the cloth becomes a container for the being of the donor. Upon its being accepted and reciprocated, an ongoing pattern of mutual obligations ensues between two parties.

Recognized as a most valuable insight into the circulation of goods, the reciprocal symbolic exchange presents only one segment of the narrative of the artifact-in-motion. The failure to explore another side of the textile's role in small-scale societies may be due to the fact that the concept of commodity exchange is most often thought of as occurring in only cash based market economies.

For Rosman and Rubel (1978:106), the difficulty in assigning commodity value to artifacts in small societies like those on the Cordillera, lies in the fact that in such situations "there is no separate institutional structure which can be designated economic." Rather, there are social groups who, among their other responsibilities, carry out economic functions which operate, not independently, but as a "sub-division of the socio-cultural order" (Rosman and Rubel 1978:106-107).

Kopytoff (1986) succeeds in clarifying this dichotomy between metaphor and commodity. Instead of regarding these two spheres as operating at opposite poles, he argues (1986:68-69) that a commodity is not one kind of thing rather than another but a thing in a certain situation; this "commodity situation" is the point in the artifact's life history in which its exchangeability for some other thing is its most socially relevant feature at that particular moment. Regarding commoditization then, as a "process of becoming, he (1986:73) maintains that the artifact is able to move in and out of the commodity situation by being "singularized," or imbued with particular metaphoric meaning. This is particularly relevant to

Cordillera textiles which circulate in different exchange systems.

Textiles in their Commodity Phase

Perhaps Maquet's model, in which he distinguishes between three types of commodities, best describes the case of Cordillera textiles in their commodity phase (Appadurai 1986). One of his categories identifies artifacts that have become commodities by "metamorphosis": things intended for other uses that have been redirected and placed for a time into a commodity state.

Indeed, the functional textiles produced by the women of highland Luzon began as domestic products that acquired either a symbolic or an economic dimension for the people who produced and lived with them because of the significance of how they used them. Cotton textiles on the Cordillera have been always highly prized and have clearly established values based on type, rarity and complexity of design. There is a long history of textiles being commonly bartered in almost all circumstances involving economic exchanges such as trade, fees, fines, wages and purchases (Jenks 1905:27-28, 152-57; Eggan 1960:27).

Enterprising weavers could gain substantial economic advantages by weaving textiles not only for their own families' use, but also to trade with other customers within their village and in neighbouring settlements. Roy Barton's 1938 account, for example, of the activities of a weaver in the 1880's outlines how the young weaver "turned to [her] loom as a means of acquiring [other goods, making] trips to neighbouring regions in order to exchange the products of [her] work" (Barton 1938:180). Two skirts were exchanged for a pig, some rice for raw cotton, one skirt and one G-string [loincloth] for a pig and one G-string for a large basket of cowpeas" (Barton 1938:204, 210).

Barton (1919a:427) further cites the circuitous transaction in Ifugao in which three to four funeral blankets were traded for a needed rice wine jar. Because the seller could not find someone with a jar who wanted blankets, he traded the textiles for rice or pigs and then proceeded to exchange these for the desired jar. In addition, he (1919a:427) reports that in Ifugao province, a loincloth was frequently used to pay ten men for ten days labour. The problem was the sharing of one loincloth by ten men. If the textile was to be divided, its value would be destroyed. The difficulty was usually solved by one of the men paying two to four bundles of rice, depending upon the type of cloth, to each of the others and then taking the loincloth himself. In the above cases, the textiles derived their value as a measure of their exchangeability for an item of equal value in a finite transaction.

Ifugao customary law outlines in detail a myriad of offences and stipulates the appropriate fines due. Textiles

served as full or partial payment for slander, adultery, insults, sorcery, breaking of a contract, getting drunk during the mourning period or damaging property. Loincloths, skirts, belts and blankets materially compensated the injured for his losses, whether tangible goods or services. Moreover, a combination of textiles and animals most commonly provided the wages of priests, mediators, and labourers (Barton 1919a:427).

Gregory (1983:104) argues that the commodity exchange is "an exchange of objects between people who are in a state of reciprocal independence that establishes a quantitative relationship between the objects transacted." In this context, textiles embody an "exchange ratio" (Gregory 1983:109) that enables them to form an equation of the type: 1 loincloth and 1 skirt = 1 pig; and 1 loincloth = 1 basket of cowpeas.

Economic anthropologist Appadurai (1986:23) maintains that objects which represent aesthetic elaboration do not occupy a commodity state for long. Given that textile production in the Mountain Provinces of northern Luzon was and remains today a product of specialized knowledge involving an investment of time and materials, it is not surprising that the commodity phase of their career is indeed brief. Cordillera textiles function in this limited capacity only during the relatively short period when their exchangeability provides the means for securing or paying for another thing or service of equivalent value.

If we regard the circulation of cloth in highland Luzon as a process in which its successive phases merge into one another (Kopytoff 1986:64), we see that a textile may become less of a commodity and more of a metaphoric object through its participation in the rituals that characterize daily Cordillera life. Birth, marriage, curing, harvesting and death are the rituals that concern the maintenance of the foundation of Cordillera society, and to be most effective they will utilize material artifacts to fix the meaning more firmly (Kleppe 1989:197). Through the channels of gift exchange and distribution, the objects circulate "between people who are in a state of reciprocal dependence that establishes a qualitative relationship between [participating] subjects" (Gregory 1983:109).

On the Cordillera, no social or religious event is complete without textiles being bestowed, exchanged, buried or sacrificed. The movement of cloth in these instances constitutes a system for the exchange of information with the textiles functioning as the accessible parts of the information system (Douglas 1979:71-72). Here, textiles provide dominant metaphors for group identity, social interaction and cultural expression.

Unlike artifacts from a literate society which are predicated upon a discursive mode, in pre-literate societies, such as those in northern Luzon, the object itself and its performance stores the information and materializes a way of

experiencing life. In being offered, accepted or refused, the artifacts reinforce, maintain or undermine existing boundaries and norms of behaviour (Douglas 1979:72).

Textiles as Metaphor

In highland Luzon, the production of cloth and the people's religious beliefs and practices share a common origin in Cordillera creation myths. Hence, textiles from their inception may function as metaphor at certain times in their lives. Indeed, among the Ifugao, this shared origin is illustrated in the fact that the entire weaving process is deified. At a ceremony's commencement, the order of invocation of the most called upon group of deities echoes the steps followed by a weaver processing cotton and weaving cloth. A few of the gods named, for example, include: Separator of the Seeds from Cotton"; "User of the Spindle Bob"; "Winder into Skeins"; and "Weaver" (Barton 1946:15,30; Lambrecht 1958:40-41).

The extent to which textiles comprise part of Cordillera communication systems again becomes evident in their application, in certain situations, as a substitute for language. From birth, every Ifugao child is carried on their mother's back in rectangular cloths known as blanket-slides or *oban*. Likewise, the adult Ifugao is supposed to be carried in a spiritual blanket-slide by a particular class of ancestral deities who are invoked when a perilous journey or act is undertaken. Pleas for protection ask the deities to "tighten the knot of our *oban*," (Barton 1938:36; 1946:43-44,139) and when someone has died, the spirits are chastized, "thou has let us down from the blanket-slide" (Barton 1946:174).

As Fox (1977:97) summarizes for Indonesia's outer islands, cloth as metaphor "swaddles the newborn, wraps and heals the sick, embraces and unites the bride and groom, encloses the wedding bed, and in the end, enshrouds the dead." Kalinga babies, for example, are received in barkcloth blankets so that the child's arms and joints will grow as strong as those of the tree from which the bark came (Dozier 1966:89). At the Ifugao birth feast, textiles are among the presents exchanged by both sides of the family, and indeed, even in the case of illegitimate children, it is the obligation of the father to give the mother an *oban* blanket in which to carry the baby as a sign of his formal recognition of paternity (Barton 1919b:36).

According to Gaddang marriage custom, the boy's family states intent by presenting an heirloom bead or beaded textile, known as "uniter" to the girl's family (Barton 1949:46). Throughout the engagement each family continues to send similar gifts in support of each other's rites to maintain this interfamily link; accounts detail the wealth of textiles displayed and used in these exchanges (Jenks 1905:68-69; Barton 1919b:20-24, Lambrecht 1935:192-96).

Among the textile gifts given to the Kalinga and Ifugao vendors upon the purchase of family property, are a category of cloths known as *pa-anao* and *apon*. These include skirts and blankets symbolic of watercapes or "wrappings" which are meant to protect the other gifts from damage on the homeward journey, and loincloths symbolic of ropes which are to be used to lead home the gift of animals (Barton 1949:112-113).

The circulation of cloth in transactions such as property transfers again belie the multidimensional character of Cordillera textiles. On one hand, the textiles function as commodities in constituting the principal payment, deriving their value from their exchangeability for the desired item whether a rice field or water rights. On the other hand, the subsequent obligatory kinship payments and gifts that must be made to both sides of the family both materially compensate the relatives for their lost inheritance and at the same time visibly acknowledge their status and position within the family hierarchy.

Barton's (1938:117) account of the establishment of an Ifugao trading partnership recalls a similar situation. As his gift, Barton's informant took with him one carabao, one funeral blanket, three loincloths and four knives and was welcomed with the offering of either a "rich man's [ceremonial] blanket" or a pig. The informant took the pig as he already owned a ceremonial blanket. Clearly, the exchange of gifts linked the two parties cementing the interregional trade and social relationship. However, the flexibility in the system that here permitted the pig to be so easily substituted for the textile firmly places the cloth in a commodity phase since it was not the textile itself that was required, but any object of equivalent value.

Perhaps the most lavish display of textiles occurs at death. Early 20th century accounts record the wealth of loincloths and blankets that bedeck the deceased's displayed body, envelop the corpse before burial, and then wrap the bones for secondary burials; the more cloth, the wealthier and more prestigious the person (Jenks 1905:79-80; Moss 1920:373; Barton 1946:172-81; Dozier 1966:112-113). The lack of cloth relates its own story. Men or women who had previously been beheaded or who had died in disgrace were buried in a separate area unaccompanied by the usual mound of ritual cloths lest they bring bad luck to the village (Barton 1946:178-79).

Throughout death rituals, textiles function as a life metaphor, embodying an effort to regenerate life and relationships eliminated at death (Weiner 1980:71). This is illustrated in the enormous amount of energy and materials involved in the continuing funerary activities of the mourners' spinning and weaving, in the intensive application of cloth used in circulating the bedecked body of the deceased among family members and in wrapping and rewrapping the bones for each stage of secondary burials.

In addition, textiles as a product of women and hence as a metaphor for fertility, were intensively used throughout agriculture and headhunting practices to ensure the success of the crop and the hunt.

Summary

Performing as both commodity and metaphor in the social and economic spheres of Cordillera society, textiles follow a non-linear path. On one level, the same cloth may emerge as commodity at one time and as cultural metaphor at another or may be regarded simultaneously, as a commodity by one person, and as something quite different by another, depending upon the context.

In fact, Cordillera textiles embody a dual existence encompassing changing, often competing, meanings. Because reciprocity and the analogy of the textile as metaphor provide the basis of so many Cordillera social relations, complete commodification of the textile is prevented. By the same token, the constant demand for textiles in the myriad rituals of daily Cordillera life must have stimulated economic activity in the form of increased cloth production and exchanges designed with an eye on accumulation for later ritual use, although early scholars state that this was not in evidence. Hence, the resultant activity is a constant push/pull action that maintains this recursive interchange between the commodity and the metaphor.

A second level encompasses the theme of reciprocity and redistribution in which textiles circulate, in their capacity as cultural metaphor, among family, community and partnership members. Here textiles travel up and down the generations from parent to child to grandchild and extend from the spirits of the Underworld to the those of the Upperworld.

Drawing on Voss' (1987:131) observation about the distribution of meat on the Cordillera, what is noteworthy within this context of textile movement is the structure of the actual distribution, "who gets what, in what order" and at what stage. The many examples of textile distribution in Cordillera rituals reveal a consistent hierarchy of textile types. The most prestigious funeral blankets, skirts and loincloths are the first to accompany the newborn, the newly married couple and the deceased in their transition to a new life, and to ensure a fruitful harvest and headhunt. Supplementary textile gifts of lesser quality are distributed to kin in a descending hierarchy of value depending on their relationship and their role.

Indeed, early anthropologists such as Jenks (1905), Barton (1919a; 1919b; 1938; 1946; 1949) and Lambrecht (1935) methodically recorded the indigenous names of each type of textile in reference to the particular transactions they were

describing. However, not only did they fail to comment further upon the integral role of cloth in Cordillera life, they also overlooked the universally understood information system implicit in the textile hierarchy that they took such great pains to record. The bestowal of a particular cloth in a particular circumstance told of the status and wealth of both the giver and receiver and of the value and importance of the occasion as well as the relationship between individuals and families. The hierarchy of textiles echoed the vertical relationships between people of unequal status and the horizontal relationship between those of more equal standing. The hierarchical distribution of cloth reinforces the prevalent Cordillera custom of primogeniture, in which the oldest child, regardless of sex, receives the larger share of the family's inheritance, and the balanced distribution of cloth to both affinal and blood relatives materializes the bilateral kinship system predominant throughout the Mountain Provinces.

Highland Luzon textiles weave the social, spatial and temporal dimensions of society together in a series of recursive threads. Their interactive roles in social and economic venues uncover levels of significance of the textile and of the Cordillera worldview which informs and augments the understanding of both artifact and action.

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