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## ARTIST, CRAFTSMAN, FACTORY WORKER: CONCERNS IN THE STUDY OF TRADITIONAL ART\*

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Much of the research on Philippine traditional art has focussed on the artifact rather than the artisan. In particular, a large gap exists in our understanding of the changing systems of production in which the artist, artisan, or craftsman is embedded. Under what conditions was the folk artist transformed into the craftsman and the craftsman into the factory worker? By what forces were independent artisans and cottage workers turned into guilds (if such existed in the Philippines) and guilds into modern unions? By what social and economic processes did the worker lose control of his work?

These are large questions, which I shall not presume to fully answer. What I wish to do here is to sketch an outline of the problem (and perhaps necessarily, but tentatively, of the answer) by bringing in some data from Philippine history and ethnography as well as insights from studies on transformations of systems of production. My particular interest lies in the organization of work, "the structure of work," which essentially involves the relation of the worker to his work and to the product of his work. My concern is historical in that I am interested in the long-term transformations of structure and relations, the study of which involves an inquiry into such matters as the control of the means of production, the nature of exchange and distribution, and the character of reward for work.

It is difficult to trace long-term transformations because of the lack of detailed histories of such crafts in the Philippines as pottery production, the textile industry, the building and woodcarving trade, and others. A survey of the literature, however, suggests three principal stages in craft history. I shall try to illustrate these stages by bringing in some data about randomly-chosen crafts: native pottery production in prehistoric times,

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the textile industry of Iloilo in the Spanish period, and shellcraft in Cebu today.

## PRE-MARKET ECONOMY: THE CASE OF POTTERY

The Philippines had a vibrant tradition in native pottery in pre-Hispanic times. Preponderant archaeological data, however, create an image of an early economy already “disturbed” by the presence of foreign porcelain and stoneware items. As early as the 10th century AD (and peaking from the late 13th to the 15th century) there was a significant influx of trade ceramics from China, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand. The heavy volume of external trade (prehistoric imports of Chinese ceramics amounted to a million pieces) suggests an already complex society, with a developed trading and distribution network, an elaborate social organization, and marked social differentiation.<sup>1</sup>

The degree to which a primitive market economy operated, however, varied across the landscape. In most places, and at an earlier stage, a simpler economy existed. The potter operated outside of the market, producing pottery for household use or for personalized, ad hoc exchanges within a socially and geographically circumscribed sphere. Artistically significant items were produced or exchanged within ritual contexts in the form of prestation and gift exchange. Goods moved through reciprocal horizontal or vertical (patron-client) channels in barter, tribute payments, or social transactions cementing alliances between groups and communities.

The early potters (mostly women) were non-specialists, who produced for domestic use. As pottery became an item of exchange, specialists in the craft emerged. As a norm, however, they were part-time specialists since the demand for their work was sporadic and seasonal. In both domestic and early trade production, the potter controlled the process of production. In the main, the potter had free access to raw materials, owned the tools, presided over the making of the whole product, possessed valuable knowledge (which could be passed on to a son or daughter), had opportunities for artistic play, and exercised control over the value of his work.

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<sup>1</sup>Karl L. Hutterer, “Prehistoric trade and the evolution of Philippine societies: a reconsideration,” *Economic Exchange and Social Interaction in Southeast Asia*, ed. K.L. Hutterer (Ann Arbor: Michigan Papers on South and Southeast Asia, 1977), 177-196; *idem.*, “A balance of trade: the social nature of late pre-Hispanic Philippines,” *The Donn V. Hart Southeast Asian Collection* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University, 1985).

It is often said that the influx of Chinese ceramics destroyed the native pottery tradition. This is a simplistic postulate. Archaeological and ethnohistorical evidence points to how the foreign trade in ceramics and other goods stimulated an active internal trade in native pottery. In exchange for the foreign imports that the trading settlements received they had to ship out in exchange marine and forest products (beeswax, bird's nest, pearls, aromatic woods, and others) which were sourced from the hinterland. This promoted exchange between inland and coastal, or "central" and "peripheral," settlements. Native pottery was an important item in this exchange. Such internal exchange is borne out by the distribution across a wide area of formal elements of native earthenware pottery.

Increased demand, however, led to a decrease in the quality of foreign ceramics as well as of native earthenware itself. The expansion of the market occasioned the appearance of low-quality, mass-produced goods manufactured in the Asian mainland (in the case of trade ceramics) or in rising Philippine craft centers (in the case of native pottery). This must have happened not only because of the standardization that usually accompanies market production but because the market in this case was a hinterland-market and one not rich enough to demand high-value goods.

Within the Philippines, the rise of the market occasioned economic differentiation as primary trading ports and manufacturing specializations emerged. The scattered distribution of resources in tropical areas, the increase in the size and complexity of communities, and the demands of trade occasioned the rise of manufacturing industries (blacksmithing, pottery, and perhaps textiles), increased craft specialization, and the presence of formal markets in the more populous settlements. A movement was made from self-sufficient communities to networks engaged, in varying degrees, in an inter-ethnic and intraethnic trade of subsistence and non-subsistence goods like pottery, textiles, gold ornaments, and woodcraft.

What does this context tell us of the pre-Hispanic craftsman? Even with the rise of trade in prehistoric times, the craftsman remained largely autonomous. The household functioned as an essentially self-sufficient production unit. The typical potter was a part-time craft specialist, combining pottery-making with agriculture and other subsistence activities. As marketized trade advanced, however, exchange was more and more articulated through relatively formalized institutions as social and political leaders and economic brokers increasingly exercised claims on the production and distribution of goods. By the 14th century, there were already wealthy chiefdoms in parts of the country that probably

maintained coteries of full-time craft specialists working in central production places.

Native potters, however, did not “advance” beyond the production of earthenware. The main reasons for this “failure” were the great technical complexity in producing true porcelain (which requires high firing temperatures and special raw materials such as kaolin and a feldspathic rock, petuntse) and the lack of demand due to the availability of trade ceramics.<sup>2</sup>

### MERCANTILISM: THE CASE OF WEAVING

The expansion of trade led to the increased rationalization of the networks of production and distribution. Political leaders and merchants exercised increasing control over these networks. Elements of earlier social and economic arrangements remained but important changes followed the advance of a market economy. These changes included increased manufacturing and craft specialization, the rise of formal markets and workshops, increased elaboration of political institutions, more marked social differentiation, and growing integration of local communities into global economic networks.

Spanish colonial intervention had the effect of stunting manufacturing growth in the country as the Philippines was relegated to the position of “hinterland” or source area for primary products in an emerging global capitalist system. The character of Spanish rule, however, did not advance this process in a broad, purposive manner. The Galleon Trade, the focus of Spanish economic interests until the 18th century, had the negative effect of restricting direct access of Filipino producers to foreign trade. At the same time, however, it insulated the country from the full impact of market forces and foreign competition.

The Spaniards, of course, failed to exercise complete monopolistic control over Philippine trade. The so-called English “country-trade,” which flourished in the late 17th and early 18th century, occasioned the flow of European goods (mainly cotton piece-goods) into Manila and ports in Mindanao and Sulu, with British, French, Armenian, and other foreign merchants as carriers.

The net effect, however, of colonialism was to bias external trade into

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<sup>2</sup> Even in Europe, true porcelain was not made until the 18th century, despite a great aristocratic demand. See Keith Nicklin, “Stability and innovation in pottery manufacture,” *World Archaeology*, 3:1 (1971), 19-20. I thank Masao Nishimura, archaeologist, for this and the reference in fn. 11.

an arrangement whereby the Philippines supplied forest, marine, and agricultural products for goods of foreign manufacture such as English textiles, metal tools, and others.

This is dramatically illustrated in the native textile industry of Iloilo.<sup>3</sup> Textiles were already manufactured in Panay and elsewhere in the country prior to Spanish contact. By the mid-18th century (and until the early 19th century), Iloilo had emerged as a center for large-scale commercial weaving. Such cloths as *piña*, *sinamay*, and cotton shawls called *lompotes* were admired for their fine workmanship and aesthetic qualities. In the 1840s, Mallat listed 52 varieties of Philippine cloth and, in Iloilo, found 10 different mixtures of cotton, silk, pineapple, and hemp fibers.

Iloilo's textile products found markets not only within the Philippines but in China, Java, Singapore, Spain, England, and the United States. In the 1850s, more than half the value of Iloilo's exports was accounted for by native textiles.

The volume of production and trade suggested an advanced stage of economic organization. Iloilo towns, e.g., Molo and Jaro, developed weaving specialization. There were 60,000 looms in Iloilo around 1857, suggesting that almost one-half of the province's female labor force was engaged in the weaving industry. The household was the basic unit of production but, by the beginning of the 19th century, there were already small "factories" established in private houses, with six to a dozen looms worked by women receiving cash wages, masterweavers were contracted for a special fee to "set up" patterns in the looms of these proto-factories.

Entrepreneurs, merchants, and *personeros* (brokers) played an important role in the industry. Chinese mestizo merchants, individually or in groups, collected fabrics in the towns and contracted sailcraft transport to Manila, where they traded the textiles to merchants for sale in Luzon or for export to foreign markets. These travelling merchants, in turn, bought raw materials in the form of Chinese silk, Batangas cotton, as well as British cotton twist from Manila Chinese shopkeepers, for the return voyage to Iloilo.

The weavers, therefore, were no longer in full control over the production and distribution process. They either did not have resources to

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<sup>3</sup> Jean Mallat, *The Philippines: History, Geography, Customs, Agriculture, Industry, and Commerce* (Manila: National Historical Institute, 1983), first published in 1846; John Bowring, *A Visit to the Philippine Islands* (Manila: Filipiniana Book Guild, 1963); *A Britisher in the Philippines, or the Letters of Nicholas Loney* (Manila: Bureau of Printing, 1964); Alfred McCoy, "Ylo-ilo: Factional Conflict in a Colonial Economy, Iloilo Province, Philippines, 1937-1955" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1977), I:12-25.

enlarge their scale of production or access to such non-local raw materials as silk from China or abaca from Bicol. Weavers were plied with cash advances by patrons and middlemen and fell into a kind of debt slavery. While patterns of economic dependence had strengthened, weavers still enjoyed a fair measure of independence because of the nature of work organization in cottage production and the fact that weaving was still a part-time occupation and there were alternative employments for the household.

By the 1870s, however, the Iloilo textile industry had collapsed because of competition from cheap British cottons. The opening of Iloilo to direct foreign commerce in 1855 and the activities of British consul Nicholas Loney (a partner of Loney & Ker and agent of the American Russel & Sturgis) destroyed the Iloilo weaving industry. Loney actively promoted the importation of cheap cotton piece goods from the mills of Manchester and, in conjunction with this, encouraged large-scale sugar production in Iloilo and Negros for the return cargo of British vessels. Thus, the region's economy regressed from one based on tertiary cloth manufacture to the primary production of sugar. The drastic change is to be seen in the figures. In 1862, Iloilo exported some 151,826 *piezas* of native cloth. In 1873, this had dropped to only 5,100 *piezas*. The Iloilo weaving industry had collapsed.

In the early 19th century, textile production in such centers as Iloilo, Bicol, Bulacan, and the Ilocos, had so expanded that native cloths were not only sufficient for domestic consumption but were actually preferred, by their design and quality, over the foreign textiles available in the local market. By the 1840s, the hydraulic spinning mills had been introduced to replace the bamboo loom and improve production.<sup>4</sup> Foreign competition, however, stunted the move towards industrialization. By the early decades of the 20th century, 88 percent of total textile consumption in the Philippines was supplied by imports, and local weaving had become a marginal industry.

## CAPITALISM AND THE CASE OF SHELLCRAFT

The expansion of the market accompanied the rise of capitalism in craft production. The capitalist mode of production came about when monetary wealth was enabled to buy labor power. For this to happen, the tie between producers and the means of production (tools, materials, land)

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<sup>4</sup> Mallat, *Philippines*, 268, 458.



had to be severed. Denied access to these means, producers must then come to those who control them and sell their labor for wages so they can sustain themselves. This differs from the earlier stage of mercantilism, in which wealth is derived from price differentials, by skimming off the products of the primary producers and making profits by selling them. Only when wealth is used to control the means of production, buy labor power, and put it to work (that is, becomes “capital”) does capitalism arise.

In craft production, we find the “sprouts of capitalism” in the Philippines as early as the Spanish period, in such practices as commodity-peonage (in which the merchant supplies the producer with tools, household articles, prestige goods, or subsistence items, creating a relation of dependence so that the producer has to produce for the merchant) or the “putting-out” system (in which the merchant exercises a measure of control over the producer by advancing tools or raw materials and receiving the finished product in repayment).

Market demand and the need to rationalize production leads to a situation where craftsmen are brought directly into owner-supervised establishments or “factories.” A new form of productive enterprise, the factory, brings large numbers of workers engaged in different technical operations into one building or complex of buildings under a unified technical management. It evolves out of the need to reduce costs of supervision and transport, facilitate control of the labor force, and ensure a synchronized, continuous work process.

Factory work has far-reaching effects on the status of the craftsman. The work process is modified by breaking down the work into its essential constituents such that a worker can be harnessed to work on a part of the product instead of the whole of the product. For artisans, the shift involves a loss of status as they move from the relative self-determination of the cottage producer to the servitude of the industrial worker.

The form of transformation from one stage to another, however, is determined by conditions specific to a craft or industry. This is illustrated in the shellcraft industry of present-day Cebu. An old industry (shell ornaments are among our earliest archaeological finds), shellcraft experienced a boom with the foreign demand for decorative items and fashion accessories made of shell in the early 1970s. The export market fueled the proliferation of shellcraft “factories” in Cebu, mainly home-based shops producing a single product (shell necklaces) for firms and entrepreneurs with contacts with foreign buyers. Around 1976, the foreign demand for *heishi* shell necklaces dropped sharply, causing the near collapse of the shellcraft industry in Cebu. In the 1980s, however, the



industry was again rejuvenated with the demand for a new and wider range of fashion accessories (bangles, necklaces, pendants, and others) combining shell with a variety of natural materials (wood, bone, stone, leather, and others).

Today, there are around 250 shellcraft “factories” in Cebu Province, mostly concentrated in Metro Cebu (165 of these are registered with the National Cottage Industries Development Authority or NACIDA). There are around 10,000 full-time and part-time workers in the industry.<sup>5</sup>

The industry is multilayered, beginning with the shell gatherers and traders of specimens, to the small household workshop of 3 or 4 workers, to a network of middlemen, contractors, and agents, to the larger factories with a peak force of as many as 100 to 200, to the large exporting firms with direct access to U.S. and European markets.

The typical production unit is the small home-based workshop whose owner is also work manager, trader, and entrepreneur. According to its links to raw material sources and markets, the business combined shell gathering and dealing, shellcraft manufacturing, local trading, and exporting. Capitalization ranges from a few hundred to several thousands of pesos. Production is labor-intensive and the standard workshop consists of makeshift facilities and a limited range of simple tools. The core of the workforce may be unsalaried household members. Since work is intermittent and dependent on orders, there is a much larger “floating” body of short-term workers paid by piecework arrangement.

The industry is entrepreneur-dominated. There is a large number of petty entrepreneurs who exercise control over production, combining the functions of capitalist, works manager, and merchant. The industry, however, is dominated by big entrepreneurs with the necessary capital, know-how, and connections to bring within their orbit the mass of small workshops and independent producers. In Cebu, there are less than 10 large shellcraft exporting firms that control more than 80 percent of the total shellcraft exports.

A development that has contributed to centralization is the nature of the market. Since the current demand is for specialized fashion accessories, there is a premium on quality, variety, and design. Fast-changing styles demand intimate knowledge of foreign markets. The large exporters have overseas agents or foreign clients who keep them supplied with information and product designs. Exporters fill orders by

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<sup>5</sup> Data from interviews and records, National Cottage Industries Development Authority, Region VII, Cebu City, 29 July 1986.

having “components” produced by independent producers and workshops and then getting the articles “finished,” assembled, and packed in their own factories. Production-by-component allows entrepreneurs to protect designs, diversify products through the varied matching of components, and exercise control over quality. Importantly, entrepreneurs minimize the cost and risk of having to maintain a large corps of regular workers. “Putting out” work to home-based workers allows the entrepreneur to avoid compliance with protective labor laws and payments for social security, health insurance, and other rights and benefits.

The nature of shellcraft and its market (unlike textiles) does not lend itself to monopolistic control and full-scale factory production. It makes for a loose economic organization and allows for space in which small entrepreneurs can operate and workers enjoy a measure of self-direction. Capitalist relations, however, are the dominant tendency in the industry. Workers have little access to raw materials, tools, and market information. The typical worker works on components rather than whole products and, while he can generate designs, much of his work is imitation since the trend is for the large entrepreneurial firms to generate styles and samples through professional, salaried product designers. The worker produces for a distant market, has little control over the value of his product, and is increasingly dependent on work with unstable rewards because of the lack of alternatives and fallback employment.

## DISSOCIATION, POVERTY, AND DEPENDENCE

The history of crafts in the Philippines shows a development in which the worker has lost control over his work. Contemporary development policies and export promotion have fueled the expansion of Philippine handicraft industry such that it now employs around two-thirds of the total industrial labor force and ranks as one of the country's major dollar earners.

Yet, the labor sector of the industry is characterized by low wages, dependency, and unstable income. The worker occupies a weak bargaining position: lack of access to raw materials, credit, and financing; limited access to marketing networks; and little control over prices and profits. He has to compete with other workers in a large labor supply, has few alternative employments, and is often put outside the protection of labor laws. Rosanne Rutten remarks: “It seems that the rapid development and financial success of the Philippine handicraft industry has been made

possible mainly by the continued poverty of the rural population.”<sup>6</sup>

What have all the economic changes we have sketched meant for the craftsman or artisan? There is a differential character to the various industries and crafts. The history of a specific craft will depend on a particular constellation of variables. The standardization or rationalization of craft production will vary in degree according to the uses of the product, the nature of the market demand, and the relative advantages of large-scale production. In certain crafts, a putting-out system may be preferred over capitalist relations, thus affording the craftsman a certain degree of self-direction and independence. In general, however, the following transformations can be noted.

One: there has been a degradation in the value of human skills. In earlier times, the premium on such skills was expressed in the formal apprenticeships and the rituals that attended the practice of craft. A market-driven technology has displaced or degraded such skills. The standardization of work has diminished areas for individual expression as art is reduced to craft and craft becomes common labor.<sup>7</sup>

Two: there has been a loss of the corporate identity of craftsmen, represented in earlier times by priesthoods, mysteries, and guilds. Craftsmen used to take pride in their calling, identifying themselves with their craft rather than with a particular job or establishment. “Master” used to refer to master craftsman, it now refers to employer. With the proletarianization of craftsmen, they join a large anonymous pool of workers and must now find expression for their corporate worth not in craft-based guilds but in modern labor unions.

Three: there has been a break in the traditional ties between participants in an exchange, between producers and users. Artists and craftsmen used to produce for a circle of known users (patrons, neighbors), a situation that invested their work and product with a marked personal and expressive element. With production for the open market, the quantity and quality of goods are tied to the vagaries of the market, the shifting fashions of the moment, and considerations of cost-efficiency

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<sup>6</sup>Rosanne Rutten, “Cottage industry and the easing of rural poverty in the Philippines: a comparison of an entrepreneurial and a cooperative approach,” *Philippine Quarterly of Culture & Society*, 10:1-2 (1982), 12-25.

<sup>7</sup>For a fine history that details this process, see Joan Scott’s study of the proletarianization of glassblowers in 19th-century France in *The Glassworkers of Carmaux: French Craftsmen and Political Action in a Nineteenth-Century City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974). I have also drawn from Theodore Caplow, *The Sociology of Work* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1954).

of products.<sup>8</sup>

Four: the worker has lost control over his work. This is a phenomenon that calls into account not only the conditions of a specific craft but a general economic environment. Workers are cut off from access to materials, tools, channels of distribution, and even knowledge. As a consequence, he is dissociated from his work and its value is demeaned by its having to be measured in terms of market-dictated wages.

Five: there is a break in the intimate connection between the practice of a craft or trade and a whole way of life. In the increased rationalization of an industry and as skills are displaced, a value-system is also altered. This is shown in the decline of weaving (a quintessential female industry in Southeast Asia) and its effect on the woman's sense of womanhood and worth. The decline of weaving displaced women in many rural communities into less morally satisfying occupations as petty trading and plantation work.<sup>9</sup> It altered the moral world women inhabited.

Economic changes have desacralized labor and we have come a long way from the time when the exchange of goods among men was a moral transaction positively animated by economic, religious, political, and aesthetic notions.<sup>10</sup> When the Kalinga woman potter remarks that "the pot has a spirit too," she suggests the rich range of moral values invested in the production, distribution, and use of goods.<sup>11</sup> In efforts at the preservation and promotion of traditional art, these are values we should not neglect.

We cannot yearn for the irretrievable — the autonomous artisan, the pure handicraft, the guild, in short, the archaic and medieval forms of production. On one hand, the exaggerated cult of manual labor dismisses the liberating possibilities of technology. On the other hand, the idealization of the free master of the craft, the cottage and the village, slights the reality and the challenge of new and changing forms of

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<sup>8</sup> The rise of commercial art does not automatically lead to the artist's direct articulation with an open market. Middlemen (including government and cultural institutions) may aid the artist in decision-making, assuming the role of traditional patrons. Tourist art — while much criticized for good reason — may be an occasion for the reinterpretation and reintegration of traditional arts.

<sup>9</sup> See Norman G. Owen, *Textile displacement and the status of women in Southeast Asia* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Occasional Papers in Women's Studies, 1981); *idem.*, *Prosperity Without Progress: Manila Hemp and Material Life in the Colonial Philippines* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1984), 149-154.

<sup>10</sup> Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Cohen & West Ltd., 1954).

<sup>11</sup> The quote is from William Longacre, "Kalinga pottery: an ethnoarchaeological study," *Analytical Archaeologists*, ed. R. Chapman (1979), 64.

economic organization.

What is needed is an effort at the protection and preservation of certain values attendant to the practice of a craft. This may take the form of attempts at restructuring the dominant economic organization of the Philippine handicraft industry, perhaps by moving it away from an industry dominated by large entrepreneurs to one controlled by production and marketing cooperatives, barangay associations, and people-based corporations.

One cannot fully speak of art unless one inquires into the human values embedded in the production of art. It is well to recall the expansive yet authentic definition of the Victorian critic William Morris that art is “man’s expression of his joy in labour.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>*Selections from the Prose Works of William Morris*, ed. A.H.R. Ball (London: Cambridge University Press, 1931), 116-117, et passim.