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Mebuyan, the Tropical, and What Could be the Erotic: A mythography

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A brown figure sits, her torso bare, her left arm outstretched with the palm open. A skirt in yellow and red folk pattern wraps around her waist—not too chromatically unlike to the three or so stand-in trees behind her, most vibrant in their orange and green, suggestive of a thicket that must be surrounding the moment. Her toes barely touch the ground, whose pebbled surface is made sense by a nearby flatness of blue-green: an implication of a river, whose lone white whorl in the middle suddenly conjures into the scene a gentle sound, albeit of course inevitably muted by the figure’s certainty of being a figurine, encased as it is in a bell-jar.

Mebuyan, the Bagobo deity believed to be residing in the underworld, is depicted as such in one of Robert Feleo’s vitrinas at the permanent exhibition of the Vargas Museum (fig. 1). However, what the deity is most known for seems to be missing in this particular rendition: her body, often imagined to be filled with layers of breasts, is merely specked instead with white, what could then be inferred as her nipples. Her body, therefore, is ultimately shaped to be as that of any indigene, which is to say *human*. And so, while the mythic provocations of the figure—by the virtue of its name, at the very least—insist that what is beheld under the glass dome is indeed the famous many-titted deity, *Mebuyan* (2009) appears to undermine too the same myth, in its seeming turn away from crucial details.



Such deviation, however, can be possibly fruitful in its revitalization of this mythic figure thought to be already ascertained. It is this creative opportunity that the present essay attempts to interrogate, through a consideration of Mebuyan in her refractions, as in Agnes Miclat-Cacayan's critical and literary engagements, as accompanied by Aster Delgado's illustration and Sadhana Bux's *From the Womb of Mebuyan* (1998); parts of Agnes Arellano's *Tatlong Buddhang Ina* (1996), *Project Pleiades* (2007), and *Project Pleiades 2* (2018); Rita Gudiño's *Mebuyan sa Idalmunon* (2017); Kublai Millan's *Goddess* (2002); and Robert Feleo's illustration in *The Soul Book* (1991) and the aforementioned vitrina *Mebuyan* (2009). While these works differ in their respective media and locations, ranging from portable paper to site-specific ceramic, the navigation of these works and attendance to each of their materiality ultimately proposes a mythographic syncopation: from merely concentrating on the trope that is Mebuyan and toward considering as well her tropicality, that is, her being a trope, as actualized by particular ecologies. This way, another way of seeing is aspired, one that is before the word that is the myth, as to foremostly recognize and perceive instead the material encountered in the present.



In the Bagobo mythology, Mebuyan was originally known simply as Tube' ka Lumabat, or sister to Lumabat, the Bagobo hero who first journeyed to the sky and became immortal. Prior to these events, Lumabat invited his sister to accompany him in his adventure, only to be rejected for the reason that she just did not want to go. A disagreement ensued between the two, culminating to her filling a mortar to its brim with rice grains, then sitting upon it. As the mortar began to spin slowly and then downwards, grains fell to the ground, which she declared to embody the human mortality thereafter: these grains were human souls inevitably coming to the underworld, first to a village that she herself would establish, and then finally to *Gimokudan*, the spirit world.

Mebuyan came to be known by her own name since then, with her village in the underworld called Banwa Mebuyan. In this place, a black river is to be found, in which Mebuyan would assist the *gimokud* or the souls of the dead through the ritual of *pamalagu*, the washing of the head and joints that relieves the *gimokud* of their longing to the bodies they left behind, easing them into their inhabitation below the earth henceforth. Only after this ritual would a *gimokud* be allowed to proceed to the Gimokudan—that is, if it does not turn out to be an infant *gimokud*, in the case of which it would be required to stay in Mebuyan’s village until it is finally able to eat rice. Until then, the deity would take care of the infant *gimokud*, feeding it from one of her many nipples that have grown all over her body since settling in the underworld.

Mebuyan’s narrative presents thus a bifurcation of her figure: that while she is believed to have originated human mortality itself, she also signifies the promise of a most tender transition from this earthly life toward the next as a spirit. Her ultimate transformation then as the many-titted deity only intimates her seemingly contradictory position in the Bagobo mythology: the layers of breasts that render her body grotesque to one’s imagination are also the parts of herself that make her kindest, particularly to the most vulnerable of spirits. “In this respect,” anthropologist Jan Pieter Raats writes, “Mebuyan would be the great mother of life as life actually is, containing the germs of death, thus being mother and monster both, and very much qualified to represent the totality.”



Mebuyan's myth provides the potent opportunity for a handful of decolonial attempts toward articulating a Philippine feminist future, precisely for her figuration of a resistance that is also most sustaining. For instance, in the story "The Shaman Woman's Dream" by Agnes Miclat-Cacayan, Mebuyan's resolute refusal to her brother's whims, which extends to the creation of her own place in the underworld, is cherished as a sign of the possibility to begin anew, at any given moment. Through such understanding of the myth, Miclat-Cacayan insists the possibility to call Mebuyan in her many other names too, among them "Renew, Recycle, Recreate, Restore, Reinvent, Reappropriate, Reclaim, Rebirth, Regenerate..."

These gestures nominated as all epithetic of Mebuyan becomes clearer considering especially the intuitive association of the Bagobo deity to the earth. According to Miclat-Cacayan, Mebuyan's layers of breasts that cover her body only translate her as "a metaphor for the earth's extravagance and exuberance," rendering her figure as the land itself, with their respective contours and cleavages reminiscent of each other. Mebuyan's being already-the-earth-itself is ultimately revealed in Aster Delgado's illustration of the deity, which accompanies Miclat-Cacayan's texts a la comics: with her eyes closed, the deity lies supine, her long black hair flows like a river, with eight of her breasts protruding upwards, two of which currently suckled each by a couple of infant gimokud.

Or as in the painting by Sadhana Buxani featured as the cover of another book, aptly titled *From the Womb of Mebuyan* (1998): sitting on the ground with three infant gimokud, with two of them clinging to her breasts, the deity is stark brown, her skin like the most generous of loam while her body is lineated roundishly, already like the most succulent of fruits. And that she looks down on these infant gimokud only sets the trope: that certainly, “Mebuyan / Earth goddess / Nurturing mother / Life-giver / Woman.”

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77 | Agnes Arellano asserts that at any instance, an assemblage of her works is considered as an “inscape,” that is, a *topos* whose sense of continuity between objects is primarily perceived from their essential—rather than the immediately material—interrelations. Structuralism then lends her oeuvre a syntax: the “sacred” and the “feminine” meet, as to permit the possibility of the “erotic,” that mythic third in which even transgression itself must be transgressed, effectually denaturalizing the most purported of logics. Hence the surrealism in Arellano’s sculptures: the feminine is not only divine (or the divine is not only feminine, for that matter), but more critically multiple, as how citations of several mythologies can simultaneously cohabit a single figuration.



fig. 2: Agnes Arellano, *Dea* in *Tatlong Buddhang Ina*, 1996, reinstalled in *Inscapes*, 2019, located at the Areté, Ateneo de Manila University. Image courtesy of the author.

In *Dea*, the middle in the triptych of cast marble sculptures called *Tatlong Buddhang Ina* (1996), Mebuyan is manifested as figure in meditative pose, with creases on her neck as if a diaphane on the skin through which the body insists to pass (fig. 2). From the figure's crotch, itself hidden by her folded legs, a serpent rises, its shape reminiscent of the naga said to once protect Gautama Buddha himself from natural elements during his own meditation centuries ago. Instead of the similar stillness, however, *Dea*'s arms intimate another possibility: while these seem to be tied behind her back, walking around the sculpture reveals the apparent transition of these arms as a pair of folded wings. Thus, any moment now can be a chance for flight: *Dea*, Latin for "goddess," sits between Vesta and Lola, dwelling and dolor themselves, most misshapen because she is an embodiment of the event itself of transformation. And so, *pace* the Barthesian striptease, in Arellano's *Dea*, immobility itself becomes a vesture, a signal for imminent movements.

This concern on change, in another of Arellano's work, turns in/ to a comparative moment among Asian mythologies. In *Project Pleiades* (2007), currently four out of projected seven goddesses stand with their arms open, each of them an amalgamation of various mythic females. Here, Mebuyan coincides with Inanna, the Mesopotamian deity associated with love fertility, and war; their con-figuration is accentuated with tamaraw horns and hooves, suggestively specifying into the vernacular the Bull of Heaven, an animal whose incredible ferocity is at Inanna's bidding. With a triton in her left hand and a noose in her right, Inanna as Mebuyan—and possibly as a tamaraw as a bull too—materializes a certain argument toward a divine newness: transcendence, for it to be true, must not only depart from this world, but as well as from its worldly cultural boundaries.

Hence, the prospect of the project as well to reiterate itself—and in doing so, execute another moment of comparativity. In *Project Pleiades 2* (2018), the above inscape partakes in *Lawas*, a public arts project in UP Diliman, translating thus the four deities to an outdoor space. This shift then warrants the change in color of the sculptures, from brown to green, which in turn extends the invocation of Asian mythologies toward a suggestion of an arguably global supposition: that the sacred feminine associates with (if not already *is*, as Miclat-Cacayan has asserted) the earth itself. This correlation of the sacred feminine with the ecological permits these deities, standing amid the greener thickets, for their tropical names: they too are the diwata of the folk imagination; Inanna, as Mebuyan, is intuited to be the Marias of the mountains as well.

Under the solid material of Arellano's sculptures is thus their essential plasticity: that beneath the fixity of molds, the possibility of figures melding as well with other figures, as far as the potent rhetoric of myth is concerned. And so, while these figures are revealed to be tropic, that is, structurations of the most figurative of turns—indeed, the sacred, the feminine, that vocabulary of archetypes—the tropics itself, as the trope's milieu, persists to collaborate: with its providence of habitat for these works, the erotic.

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A trope is a critical turn in any discourse, as a figuration of language that simultaneously directs away and toward particular matters. As such, a tropic image—say a grain of rice, a mortar, a breast or even layers of it—is realized to be not merely an image, but perhaps a force that is most vital in its implications that shape the very thing it is presumed to merely represent. Thought, therefore, is truthfully more dangerous than it seems: a trope deployed to define the outline of a thing, in turns and in time, would substitute for the totality of the thing signified.

Rosario Cruz-Lucero exemplifies the precariousness in the trope through what she claims as “the first sex change operation in the history of the Philippines”: “Only the androgynous *diwata* of Makiling survived, because it transformed itself into a seductive numph, her long brown hair waving in the wind, her Andalusian nose cutting an angular silhouette in the twilight as she sat stock still on a rock and dipped her lovely pointy toes into the Laguna. And then, for a coup de grace, she appended ‘Maria’ into her place of origin—and thus became the fairy godmother Mariang Makiling.” Henceforth, these metonyms have altered the Filipino perceptions on the intersection between nature and gender: “*bayan*,” that earthly field, becomes an “*ina*,” a mother whose manifold of sufferings has diminished her figure as perpetually in need of restoration, as to regress finally to her virginity, that purity of being.



Maria, therefore, is not mere variable a name, as it significantly points to a sensibility at work in the trope of the *feminine naturale*: that of coloniality, whose hierarchical rhetoric of over/under is, of course, only gendered.

The Spanish theologian Tomás Sánchez, for one, in his *De sancto matrimonii sacramento* (1602), first suggested that during an intercourse (after marriage, obviously), the woman must lie supine with the man on top of her, likening her to the earth to be plowed and planted with seeds; it was for this reason that it came to be known as the “missionary position.” Christopher Columbus, in 1492, makes a similar comparison in a letter he sent back home, saying that the earth was not round, but shaped like a woman’s breast—that he was, in fact, at that time, heading toward the direction of its nipple.

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Despite the liberating potential then in harnessing the feminine subjectivity through the terms of the natural, its tropicality, that is, its being a trope must be reckoned, most especially for its entanglements with colonial and patriarchal history. Such is a necessary task, regardless of the seeming intention of one’s troping. Therefore, this must include even attempts at flattery—just as how Jose Rizal, an *ilustrado* and the national hero, idealizes the beauty of a woman as Mariang Makiling as ineffable, unless through a turn to the natural: by the figure of *mutya*, which can either be a small stone considered as an *anting-anting* or a fetish; or a pearl, as in a vernacular from the orient. *Mebuyan*, as a mythic opportunity, can only be erotic then in her activation of an imagination that exceeds the naivety of merely corresponding the feminine with the natural.

After all, a trope remains as such, and has not calcified into a path, as long as it retains the capacity to turn toward elsewhere at any given chance; a trope, in other words, must foremost be erotic, with its turns only furthering to other turns.

fig. 3: Rita Gudiño, *Mebuyan sa Idalmunon*, 2017, located at the University of the Philippines, Diliman campus. Image courtesy of the author.

Therefore, for each encounter with the figuration of the Bagobo deity, a refusal must also somehow take place: the vision must see itself too in moments and places away from what has been overtly, and violently, offered. It is to chance upon the mythic figure, not only in its figuration, but in its very figurality—that entire ecology which gives rise to this thingness. That is to say, it is to perhaps contend with a figure its self-sufficiency, not only semiotically, but also materially: it is to consider Mebuyan not only in terms within the silhouette or mold of her representation at hand, but also through the milieu beyond, as her extension in fact, with “external” elements partaking as much the “internal” ones, all due to inevitable contact and collaboration in time.

In this sense, the tropics must then be allowed to intrude the tropic: it is to realize the material ecologies at work simultaneous to a given figuration of the trope. It is to perceive, for instance, how humidity vigorously interacts with a figure, say to a marble sculpture placed inside an airconditioned gallery, or to another left outdoors, vulnerable to the possibly harshest turns of the weather. And in turn, it is also to envision such figures recasting ecological materials: what are mist droplets and raindrops on the same sculpture, but perhaps sweat of varying degrees?

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The urgency in Rita Gudiño's *Mebuyan sa Idalmunon* (2017) lies not only in its figuration of the Bagobo deity in plump black ceramic, but more so in its emplacement in the University of the Philippines Diliman campus (fig. 3). For being situated by the university lagoon reminiscent of the black river in the Bagobo cosmology, the sculpture's mythic implication is expanded through its very milieu, intimating the tropics itself as part of the tableau the figure rouses. A present encounter with the sculpture is thus perceived to be a dislocation, too, in time: the mundane is now made concurrent with the mythic past—and yet, the figure refuses the exoticizing nostalgia, as the modern insists itself through the sculpture's techne, apparent as it is on the ceramic surface alone. In other words, what takes place is the contemporary, that simultaneity of times that can only be erotic, permissive as it is for the trope to turn elsewhere, and elsewhere.

That is then to say, the contemporaneity of the figure turns perhaps toward a spectral moment of comparison to another figuration of *Mebuyan*—say, Kublai Millan's *Goddess* (2002), one of the four bronze sculptures located at the University of the Philippines Mindanao campus.



fig. 4: Kublai Millan, *Goddess*, 2002, located at the University of the Philippines, Mindanao campus. Image courtesy of John Bengan.

In such comparative chance, however, the latter figure must be considered in its utmost materiality, as to not diminish it in mere homogenizing of the trope, and thereby claiming it for an imaginary of an untextured nation. For Millan's rendition of the Bagobo deity, in fact, distinctly disturbs the myth: Mebuyan is figured to not only have multiple breasts, but also multiple hands—one holding a torch above another holding a book and another a seedling, as a baby rests in peace upon another arm (fig. 4). Each hand then gesturing toward a different narrative, the outrageous simultaneity contemporizes Mebuyan's myth, not simply through its seemingly innovative addition of limbs to the deity, but through the sculpture's vital materiality that intimates the present material conditions of many women: that of laboring, in multiplicities, at any given moment, which demands limbs whose strength must be no less than that of bronze. By turning toward Mebuyan's hands, therefore, the myth finally is bared of the superficially pastoral, as to reveal a critique timely to the now.



In perhaps the first illustration of Mebuyan, Feleo's depiction of the Bagobo deity in *The Soul Book* (1991) seems to prefigure his rendition of her in one of his vitrinas almost two decades later: the deity sits on her mortar too, her breast-filled legs crossed, her toes barely touching the ground. The *sarong* she wears eases her into the scene, as its pattern blends her in to the detailed lone tree behind her, as well as to the ground, pebbled as it is, with the black river nearby, at the edge of the page. Other details are visible too this time: the deity's age, for one, is recognizable, with her cheeks hollow and eyes sunken. On her left arm, itself layered with three breasts, an infant gimokud lays, sucking another nipple hidden behind the infant's head.

Meanwhile, her right arm rests, her palm on her lap, open for one to see: another nipple. And yet, because it is without a breast, and because the illustration is in merely black and white, another sight becomes possible: that at the center of her open palm is instead an eye, its pupil small, as if exposed to much light. What it sees remains uncertain, as much as the small white stuff that seem to fall from the said palm: drops of milk, grains of rice, or few tears of what could be joy, or what could easily be sadness too. The illustration can only imply so much, colorless and flat as it is. This way, what is ultimately pointed out is the material: the paper that is foremost perceived upon contact, what permits the event—and what also bounds the figuration as a moment.

It is in such awareness of the figurality that the trope becomes tropical, and not merely tropic: for while the latter pertains to the accordance to the turn of the trope, the former recognizes being in such accordance, and therefore grasps the materiality that engenders the turn. In other words, it is in the sensing of the tropical that the erotic occurs: an epiphany becomes possible, at hand even, through an encounter with the very surface of things, their plain yet vital materiality. For through an intimate recognition of the material, the present is exposed and made more palpable. In such moment, art is realized to be not a mere artifact or representation of something else: it is a thing of the now, and thus most contemporary with the one who perceives it.

And so, Feleo's *Mebuyan* vitrina is now understood to realize its most urgent potency, not through its mythical reference alone, but all the more so via the glass that encloses the figure of the Bagobo deity. For with this glass, one is reminded of being presently located in a museum, not just in the ideological history signaled by the vitrina, but simply through the reflection its surface casts back at the onlooker. In such literal moment of reflection, one can almost reimagine the white specks on Mebuyan's body as, in fact, her eyes: perhaps she is looking back, for the one who looks at her is apparently not so unlike her, similar as they are of being visible. This way, glass is therefore turned inside-out, and the deity, as it turns out, is actually omniscient.

What can be more erotic than this, knowing that one is indeed being watched, too, and closely so—by a deity nonetheless?

JAEL MENDOZA teaches art and visual studies at the University of the Philippines in Los Baños, where she also graduated magna cum laude with a degree in Communication Arts. Her works have been shown at Sining Makiling Gallery, Pelikultura, 98B COLLABoratory, Para://Site Projects, the Ayala Museum, Project 20, Jim Thompson Art Center (TH), Lost Frames, and Gallery Tiresias (UK), among others. She completed her MA in Media Studies (Film) at the UP Film Institute. Her ongoing research and moving-image work deal with low-fidelity images, memory, and surveillance technologies. She is co-curator of Nomina Nuda, a small, nonprofit independent platform and exhibition space in Los Baños, Laguna.

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