

Film Review

Walang Rape sa Bontok (Bontok, Rapeless)

Directed by Mark Lester Valle, 2014, 119 minutes, color.
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Walang Rape sa Bontok (Bontok, Rapeless) discusses the postcolonial reality of the Philippines, where sexual violence against women is increasingly normalized. A conversation between two women opens the film. The film's head writer and the film's research assistant engage in a conversation about their personal embeddedness in the subject, both having experienced sexual abuse in their younger years. It becomes implicit in their exchange that the project itself is a part of their long process of confronting the memories of violence that haunt them.

Bontok, a town located in the mountainous Cordillera region, Northern Philippines, is the setting for the film. It is not a random location, and the film largely engages with Bontok-Igorot anthropologist June Prill-Brett's (2004) ethnographic account of its residents. Prill-Brett argues that the case of the Bontok-Igorot's egalitarian division of labor in food production is a deviation from the stereotypically expected subordination of women and domination of men, and was accompanied by a high degree of autonomy for women and lack of gendered violence. But Prill-Brett's account is based on research conducted four decades ago, and Bontok's being a utopia where women can live safely without the threat of sexual abuse is now but a memory from the past. The filmmakers do not naïvely believe that there is still a pocket of the country where the old ways persist, but instead embark on collecting oral histories from Bontok elders, interviewing experts, and searching through the local archives to establish how things used to be, and how they have been affected by the Philippine context of multiple colonial encounters (Figure 1). The elders speaking in front of the camera mourn the rapid loss of traditions that successfully withstood the Spanish, American, and Japanese colonizations, thanks to the unwieldy roads to the Bontok highlands, and to its people's fierceness in battle and headhunt-

ing (Rosaldo 1980). The well-documented and perhaps even "popularized" fierceness of the indigenous groups in these highlands has led to them being perceived as violent and savage, and makes the existence of their "egalitarian headhunting society" seem almost surreal.

The film lists a number of factors that answer the filmmakers' question, namely, what was it that made Bontok once a society without rape? For one, traditional dwelling structures affected the Bontok-Igorot's practice of physical intimacy. As an example, elders show the filmmakers an *ato* and *olog*, the traditional gender-segregated dormitories where boys and girls used to be socialized, and where they would eventually find their partners. Second, the Bontok-Igorot's ideology of gender included respect for women of any age. To illustrate this, the filmmakers show a contemporary example: the community's volunteer night watch, whose membership is composed of grandmothers. In one scene, these grandmothers, dressed in green jackets and equipped with whistles and flashlights, raid local pubs to command the customers to go home. This is, however, not a contemporary absurdity, but a continuity of tradition, whereby female elders were once the trusted guardians of the *tengaw*—a period of ritual significance, when villagers were not allowed to pass through the rice terraces in order not to upset the spirits and to allow the important rituals to continue uninterrupted. By recording these oral testimonies, the film stresses that the respect traditionally accorded to women gave them the status and prestige that ensured stability in many aspects of social life, from spiritual practices and community building to food production.

These explanations could have been tedious, but the film successfully uses humor to lighten up the story. In the scene where the filmmakers are accompanied by the elders to an *olog*, the filmmakers ask, "There are no curtains?" An elder replies, "None, of course. We didn't even have enough textile for our own clothing!" in reference to their traditional clothing of *wanes* (loin cloth) and *lufid* (woven cloth worn as a skirt). Today, there are no functioning community dormitories left. To see examples of these community houses, elders lead the filmmakers to the local museum, where replicas have been built. But this kind of humor is bittersweet; it subtly interplays with the Bontok-Igorot elders' testimonies

of grief over the disappeared forms of social organization. When “change” and “development” came to the region, gender relations were affected, leading to diminished respect and status for women. In contrast to these lamentations, the elders recount with pride that Bontok-Igorot women in the past were so powerful that they could halt tribal wars: invading warriors would flee in fear when women would raise their *lufid* to show their vaginas, for it was disrespectful to gaze upon what birthed humankind.

Paula Webster writes that bringing to the fore the power that women used to hold can push women, and also men, “to imagine a society that is not patriarchal, one in which women might for the first time have power over their lives” (1975, 155). But as the film demonstrates, Bontok-Igorot women did have power over their lives. By pointing out the power that Bontok-Igorot women *once* held in many aspects, *Walang Rape sa Bontok* makes assertions linked to ongoing debates about matriarchy and egalitarianism that there is value to be found in returning to the past, especially when imagining and crafting the future. The film, continuously touring colleges and indigenous and lowland communities all over the Philippines, provides a powerful vision of what future present-day Filipinos can forge with lessons from the past. While the film makes arguable assertions that it was because of the “simple” social organization of the Bontok-Igorot that gender relations could be egalitarian, a more important point that the film offers is that of reorientation: by revisiting the social organi-

zation of “simple” societies such as the Bontok-Igorot, it can be argued that violence against women is a product of cultural encounter, historical erasure, and social normativization.

In visual anthropology, work done with indigenous peoples can often be conceptualized and academically presented as a “collaboration.” Collaboration frequently is left unproblematized, although it is an encounter charged with manifestations of power, privilege, and race. In the film, the film’s head writer and research assistant tell their difficult stories; the head writer and the director, Mark Lester Valle, reveal that the film is a shared project for them to strengthen their life partnership; the advice of elders is sought to find answers that will engender both personal healing from past violence and communal soul searching in the wake of continuing erasure of ancestral ways and knowledge. The filmmakers stayed for five months in Bontok for this project, and Valle’s fluency in the regionally spoken language contributed to their gaining of access to interviews with the community’s respected members. Coalescing into a film, these strands seek to reclaim the postcolonial narrative through the public sharing of the intimate, and through fostering an acute sense of historical loss (Figure 2).

Walang Rape sa Bontok does not claim to be an ethnographic work, and it was produced through a film grant that limited its production schedule, affecting the filmmakers’ documentation methods. In terms of their documentary filmmaking techniques,



FIGURE 1. Farmers at work on the Cordillera rice terraces, where clusters of modern homes now sit. Image courtesy of Habi Collective Media.



FIGURE 2. *Walang Rape sa Bontok* film crew hold a group interview with Bontok-Igorot women elders. Image courtesy of Habi Collective Media.

the film could have benefited from a more ethnographic approach to seeking consent from its participants. For example, near the beginning of the film, the filmmakers record their first personal encounter with Prill-Brett. The camera is rolling as they enter her office, and Prill-Brett's discomfort is apparent as she turns away. Interestingly, it is only this scene with the academic expert where a degree of discomfort by the film's informants is seen. One would expect Prill-Brett to have a longer sound bite as an expert and as a "native" of Bontok, but the interview scene with her ends as quickly as it starts. There is something to be learned from the awkward interaction of the anthropologist as expert with the filmmakers in this particular scene. A film, particularly when oriented toward giving voice to marginalized peoples, needs to problematize more seriously the camera as potentially becoming a "predatory weapon" (Sontag 1977) that may inflict unintentional violence on its subjects despite the noble goals of the person who wields it. *Walang Rape sa Bontok* thus only engages with Prill-Brett's anthropological text, but not more explicitly with Prill-Brett herself as an anthropologist of her own community. One wonders whether Prill-Brett would have agreed to a more personal participation in the film had the filmmakers opted to patiently wait for her consent, rather than wielding the camera like a shotgun that demanded immediate answers.

The film is powerful material for teachers of anthropology interested in postcolonialism, feminism,

intimacy, self-reflexivity, and auto-ethnography. At present, there is no established school of visual anthropology in the Philippines, and *Walang Rape sa Bontok* is a remarkable and much-needed contribution to this young field. Prill-Brett's ethnographic work on Bontok can serve as an accompanying text to the film. Should the teacher wish to expand further the discussion to several lectures, Marlon Fuentes's faux documentary *Bontoc Eulogy* (1995) about a Bontok descendant's search for the remains of his great-grandfather who was sent to the 1904 St. Louis World Fair to be shown at the human zoo can be used to problematize the early stages of "development" and how modern society's attitudes to indigenous lifestyles have been shaped over time. Together, these works complicate the discussions about the radical cultural changes in the Cordillera mountains (and in the postcolonial countries at large), and about the creative and agentive strategies that its people have adopted as forms of claim making and as kernels of cultural revival.

References

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