
Performing Filipinism in Japan: An Analysis of the *Bahay Kubo* Production

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Abstract

The central theme of this article rests on the idea that culture can be reflected and reinforced through public presentations. In their way of (re)creating and (re)producing their culture and ethnicity, Filipino migrants showcase dances and songs in various events and productions in Japan and elsewhere around the globe. I particularly examine the *Bahay Kubo* production and contend that this performance demonstrates one of the ways Filipino migrants epitomize and dispense ideas about their culture as well as their identity. It is hoped that through this public performance of the *Bahay Kubo*, cultural (re) awareness and racial recognizance could be configured.

Introduction

One of the prevalent courses of social sciences and humanities research in the Philippine studies is Filipinism, described as the Philippines' edition of Orientalism (Tejero, 2007). Scholars accredit this proclivity to the incarnation of national consciousness among Filipino people. These studies on Filipinism have focused on different aspects of domestic or family relationships, traditions, and values of Filipinos (Medina, 2005; Andres, 1989). There are also studies on images and representations that highlight Filipinos' articulation of their identity and culture (Strobel-Mendoza, 2010; Torres, 2006; Rivera, 2004). As former President Dr. Jose P. Laurel declares:

Filipinism is the assertion of one's national birthright with patriotism defined as love of country as a primary element. It takes the form of a passion for self-development alone. A colonized people cannot hope to be developed by its masters except along lines that suit the vanity and cupidity of the masters. For a nation to find itself and its souls and achieve its God-given destiny, it has to develop itself with as little help from outsiders as possible (JPLMF, n.d.).

These enunciations of identity and culture are not only exhibited in the Philippines. Filipinos scattered around the globe also find ways to maintain, create, re-create, and articulate their culture and ethnicity. In Japan, there are different organizations and associations that Filipinos belong to. These groups maybe comprised by students, researchers, workers, and family members. Their main aim is to make life more comfortable for Filipinos in Japan. One of these organizations is the Association of Filipino Scholars in Tsukuba, abbreviated as FAST. This Association maintains a thrust that is independent, non-stock, and non-political in nature. Article II of its Constitution (2000) promulgates: "It provides a venue for regular

exchanges and interaction among Filipinos in general, especially among Filipino scholars based in Ibaraki Prefecture ... and whenever possible, to promote the rich Filipino heritage and culture in various exposures” (p. 2). Its Preamble, moreover, stipulates:

We, the officers and members of the Association of Filipino Scholars in Tsukuba, bound by the common realization of the value and wisdom of unity and solidarity amongst ourselves, are conscious of the need to integrate our individual aspirations towards fulfillment of our common interests, committed to the pursuit of promoting Filipino values, customs and traditions, and inspired by the ideals of our own principles and faith ... (p. 1).

In their quest to enact in what it means to be “Filipino”, at the same time to carry out the crux of its Constitution, the FAST officers and members participate in the annual International Festival organized by the municipality of Tsukuba. This event is a venue for different racial/ethnic communities living in Tsukuba to partake and showcase their rich cultural heritage to Japanese as well as to the international community.

Tsukuba, in passing, is a man-made city designed to alleviate overpopulation in the Tokyo area. Considered as the Science City of Japan, Tsukuba houses 60 national testing and research facilities that encompass fields such as science, industry, agriculture, environment, space development, and among others. It also accommodates higher learning institutions including the well-esteemed University of Tsukuba campuses. Essentially, the city is a haven for research excellence and educational merit. Because of all this, Tsukuba City holds a global feel. There are about 3,000 foreign students and researchers from 90 countries staying in, according to the Tsukuba City information website (<http://www.tsukubainfo.jp/tsukuba/>).

Because of the significant international communities in Tsukuba, the International Festival is a fitting event that locals and foreigners look forward to. It was year 2008 when I got the chance to watch it. It was also my first time to take part in the event as a member of the organization.

The FAST, with its 30 plus members, joined forces to put up a lavish and formidable cultural production. It was themed the *Bahay Kubo*. The event was held on May 10–11, 2008 at the Tsukuba Center amphitheater. To give the feel of the event, I take you for a walk down memory lane as I call the occasion to mind.

It was chilly and rainy that week in Tsukuba when the International Fair was held. As part of the celebration, the FAST joined hands to put up a booth and orchestrated a dance and song numbers for its cultural presentation. The then President, John Maninang, thought of a theme that would capture the ingenuity and creativity of Filipino minds and hearts. He dubbed it as the *Bahay Kubo*, to which the English translation is Nipa hut.

The *Bahay Kubo* is an indigenous house used in the Philippine Islands. This native house is built out of bamboo and secured with straw roof using Nipa/Anahaw leaves. Nipa huts were once the original houses of the people in the Philippines before the colonization of the Spaniards came. These shacks are still in use today especially in rural and remote areas.

Accordingly, with the *Bahay Kubo* in mind, we, members, built an improvised *Bahay Kubo* to serve as our booth or kiosk. For two days, it became our shelter and humble abode. We offered Filipino food like *adobo* (marinated meat with sauce containing vinegar and garlic), *arrozcaldo*, (ginger flavored rice-chicken soup) and *sago* (dry granulated or powdered starch), and *gulaman* (jelly) for drinks to our customers. I can still vividly recall the laughter, warmth, and joviality of the atmosphere amid the cold rain. Such ambiances made us feel at home: cozy and familiar. As one member equipped: “*Parang nasa Pinas lang ako. Parang nasa bahay lang ako. Ang sarap ng feeling!*” (I feel like I am just in the Philippines. I feel

like I am just at home. This is truly a nice feeling!)

The second day was set aside for the public display of performances from the different participating communities of the event. For the Filipino community, a famous Philippine dance of the Maguindanao people, *Singkil* (traditional Philippine bamboo dance), was performed. Students and workers alike spent countless days and nights preparing for this cultural event. This had paid off, as Japanese as well as international audiences were amazed at the immaculate performance: the intricate and synchronized dance steps and elaborate and colorful costumes that no one could have missed! Notwithstanding, the heartfelt rendition of *Ako ay Pilipino* (I am a Filipino) song sent goose bumps running up and down my spine! As the performance dawned on the crowd, I could hear loud cheers and applause. I stood up close to tears and started waving and clapping signifying my congratulatory praises to the performers for a job well done. Truly, they have made mother Philippines proud!

This cultural production is one of the many events and productions in Japan and elsewhere in the world that Filipino migrants showcase their culture and ethnicity. In this essay, I examine the *Bahay Kubo* and argue that it elucidates one of the sundry ways in which Filipino migrants perform “narratives” (in this case the song and dance presented at the International Festival) that disseminate and show ideas about culture and identity. The crucial premise of this paper, moreover, lies on the notion that public performances reflect and reinforce shared beliefs and cultural systems amongst Filipino migrants in Tsukuba. With the *Bahay Kubo* as the unit of analysis, how do Filipinos in Tsukuba perform Filipinism before the eyes of Japan and the international community? I assert that the images and representations depicted in the *Bahay Kubo* provide important traces in recognizing as well as in understanding Filipino culture and ethnicity amid migration. I also argue that these representations could offer insights on the corpus of portrayals through which Filipinos describe, demarcate, and define themselves.

The public presentation of *Bahay Kubo* production and the depictions that it carried out could be explored and understood in four transected routes to which this essay is anchored on:

1. The *Bahay Kubo* as form of a narrative and public ritual, which dispenses the venue for the “collective definition and self-construction” (Labrador, 2002, p. 296) of Filipinism;
2. The *Bahay Kubo* as an “expression of a diasporic Filipino consciousness” (Labrador, 2002, p. 297);
3. The *Bahay Kubo* in the guise of “cultural activism” (Ginsburg, 1997, as cited in Labrador, 2002, p. 297); and
4. The *Bahay Kubo* as an imagined home.

The Bahay Kubo: A Narrative and Public Ritual

Regardless of racial/ethnic denomination, a narrative is a critical and essential form of human communication (Matthews-DeNatale, 2008). It functions as a means to understand national history and collective identity amongst groups and entities (Hazel, 2007; Reissmann, 1993).

For Filipinos who have gone abroad to seek greener pastures, there is always a necessity to search for cultural narrative because this will afford them a platform for communication and exchange. When there was still no systematic way of storing knowledge, poetry and storytelling were the only means to save and pass this cultural knowledge from one generation to another (Hazel, 2007; Matthews-DeNatale, 2008). For Filipino migrants nowadays, print and electronic media largely furnish the necessity for a narrative, which is also supplied in cultural productions. The encouraging thing about live cultural productions is that it brings about more engagements hence establishing camaraderie and belongingness amongst performers and spectators. Such narratives, then, bring about migrants’ yearning to rekindle their culture and identity.

The case of the *Bahay Kubo*, consequently, provided the opportunity for Filipino migrants to revisit and

recover their wandering and perhaps lost identities in the host society. It should be noted, however, that our identities are not stagnant or operate in a vacuum. Our identities are socially centered. This means that our identities are maintained and (re) constructed because of our interaction and relationship with other people. The cultural performance that involves songs and dances produces stories of the Filipino people. This serves, then, as a mirror of who we are as a race. The *Bahay Kubo*, moreover, afforded the vehicle for negotiating communal kinship and ties among Filipinos in Tsukuba Japan. This, then, provided a positive indication of the camaraderie and fraternity of Filipinos as one solid racialized group abroad.

It should be remarked that in Japan, Filipinos comprise the fourth largest ethnic group behind Chinese, Koreans, and Brazilians. Most of these Filipinos are paid entertainers and spouses or children of Japanese nationals. Portions of this group are trainees, students, assistant language teachers (ALT), and researchers. In Tsukuba, 350 Filipinos are registered either as workers or students. Hence, such gathering of Filipinos at the International Festival is lauded. It functions as a setting to showcase our culture and (re) construct our identity as a Filipino through the performance of the *Bahay Kubo*.

When narrating a story, one is handed the power to decide what needs to be included and/or excluded in the storytelling process (Hazel, 2007; Matthews-DeNatale, 2008). As Reismann (1993) discloses, “nature and the world do not tell stories, individuals do. Interpretation is inevitable because narratives are representations” (p. 2). In the *Bahay Kubo* performance, the FAST officers particularly chose the song and dance for the production. They may have, consciously or unconsciously, handpicked this song and dance which has surely presented how the Filipino identity was fashioned. Since the *Bahay Kubo* was staged and seen by Japanese and foreigners alike, it then positioned who and what Filipinos are. This is what Barbara Myerhoff (1992), a cultural anthropologist, calls a “definitional ceremony” or public ritual, which means that cultural productions, such as the *Bahay Kubo*, provide a venue to assert and articulate one’s ethnicity and culture amidst being indiscernible and peripheral especially in an extremely homogenous Japanese society. As Myerhoff (1992) aptly puts it: “they are strategies that provide opportunities for being seen and in one’s own terms, garnering witnessing to one’s worth, vitality, and being” (as cited in Labrador, 2002, p. 288).

Perusing Myerhoff’s idea of “definitional ceremony”, the *Bahay Kubo* dramatized and dispensed the collective definition and construction of Filipinism amongst Filipino migrants in Tsukuba and afforded “opportunities to appear before others in the light of their own internally provided interpretation” (as cited in Labrador, 2002, p. 297). During the festival, Filipino students and workers were both performers and spectators. They performed the song and dance while those in the audience witnessed the performance. The booth (a nipa hut), which was put up, served as the domicile for us during the two-day event. The performers were given authority and power to demarcate themselves alongside the different international communities present in the event. Moreover, I believe that performers were cognizant, sentient, and deeply conscious of their engagement and participation in the cultural production. As one dancer pronounced: “Through this production, I think I have defined who I am, and it made me more in touch with my culture and ethnicity as a Filipino!” Representations of who Filipinos are, therefore, have been constructed and fashioned based on how performers collectively structured and plotted the *Bahay Kubo* presentation.

According to Myerhoff (1992), “cultural performances are reflective in the sense of showing ourselves to ourselves. They are capable of being reflexive, arousing consciousness of ourselves as we see ourselves. As heroes in our own dramas, we are made self-aware, conscious of our consciousness” (as cited in Labrador, 2002, p. 297). Students and workers’ performance in the *Bahay Kubo* mirrored who they were as Filipinos and this then became who they intimated. And as for us Filipino spectators, the *Bahay Kubo* allowed us to relive, re-enact and re-create our sense of pride, honor, and identity.

The *Bahay Kubo*: An Articulation of Diasporic Filipino Consciousness

The *Bahay Kubo* was organized and carried-out by the Association of Filipino Scholars in Tsukuba or FAST. Membership in this association is classified in four categories: full or affiliate members, active alumni, and honorary members (FAST Constitution and By Laws, 2000, p. 3).

The FAST was founded in 1987 and falls under the bounds of the International Student Center of the University of Tsukuba. Throughout the year, the FAST organizes an array of events for its members, which include social gatherings, Filipino movie marathon, and several lectures and discussions concerning relevant issues about the Philippines-Japan relations. One of the major activities that the FAST sets up is the cultural production at the annual International Festival in Tsukuba of which the *Bahay Kubo* was the theme in 2008. In a sense, the FAST acts and operates much like other racial/ethnic clubs since it provides a venue for students and workers alike to merge and form shared bonds among Filipinos in Tsukuba, and within the Ibaraki Prefecture. Moreover, it also functions as a place where members can talk about their struggles, sentiments, and encounters as migrants, which in turn ensues an opportunity for the establishment of a diasporic sensibility.

Filipinos who have witnessed the performance would agree with the idea that it heightened the level of cultural awareness in us, more so with the performers who have enacted and internalized their characters from the very beginning of the rehearsals up to the actual performance. I must admit that when I was in the Philippines, I watched numerous well-orchestrated cultural productions performed by professional dancers and singers, but these shows did not trigger any emotional response in me. But having lived in Japan for a couple of years now, I realized that there is always this innate desire for something Filipino – this yearning to reconceive that Filipino in me! I deem that this feeling I got, is almost likely to be shared by most, if not all, Filipino migrants. Taken by the incredulity of the *Bahay Kubo*, the production itself directed us to rediscover, return to our cultural roots, and relive what it means to be a Filipino.

What is more, the *Bahay Kubo* cultural presentation empowered dispersed Filipinos to be (re)introduced to the “homeland”, where dances and songs are part of the way of life, where hilarity over problems takes preference, and where hospitality and warmth produce friendship and companionship. Such enunciations of the diasporic consciousness emphasize the cultural-arousal of Filipino migrants.

Consequently, diasporic Filipinos who partook and engaged in, whether as a performer or a spectator, the *Bahay Kubo* production generated feelings of belongingness and fellowship amongst them regardless of the displacements and dislocations caused by experiences of migration.

***Bahay Kubo*: A Guise for Cultural Activism**

I started with the idea that cultural productions, like the *Bahay Kubo*, are narratives that comprise images and representations. These are the currency of cultures, which reflect and reinforce particular shared beliefs and value systems as well as one’s culture and identity. These performances show how a diasporic community define and locate themselves in the world.

The Filipino diaspora, among other diasporic communities, provides an opportunity for cultural forms and social relationships. This is to say that despite being uprooted from one’s homeland, this actually instigates a sense of community among members as well as a consciousness to celebrate their displacement. Through public presentations, it is hoped that it would facilitate a more general optimistic perception and attitude towards migrants.

These memorializations of being displaced could be well understood as “cultural activism” (Ginsburg, 1997, as cited in Labrador, 2002, p. 299). The *Bahay Kubo* production could be perceived as such,

although as a guise or pretext only. I believe it was neither the primordial intent of performers nor that of the FAST officers to espouse cultural activism in the production. It cannot be denied, however, that this kind of cultural production, especially shown in a foreign land, advocates cultural and ethnic ideologies. It may have been a frontage or smokescreen idea, but if symptomatically analyzed, cultural activism is forthright and existent in the *Bahay Kubo* production. The presentation was perceived as a site of critical importance when it represented the Filipino diasporic community to Japanese and the rest of international community. The FAST took a positive action in effectively promoting Filipino cultural awareness and pride in which it is hoped that this will dispel certain beliefs/notions or stereotypes towards Filipinos. Furthermore, this production bestowed cultural presence in Tsukuba with the hope that it will locate and position Filipinos among the rest of the communities in the Ibaraki prefecture.

The singing of *Ako ay Pilipino* (I am Filipino), to boot, with passion and zeal during the performance was a form of assertion to claim racial/ethnic identity, at the same time, an affirmation of national dignity and honor. In order to understand this assertion, below are the lyrics of the song with the English translation.

AKO AY PILIPINO

Written by: George Canseco

Ako ay Pilipino/Ang dugo'y maharlika/Likas sa aking puso/Adhikaing kay ganda Sa Pilipinas na aking bayan/Lantay na Perlas ng Silanganan/Wari'y natipon ang kayamanan ng Maykapal/Bigay sa 'king talino/Sa mabuti lang laan/Sa aki'y katutubo/Ang maging mapagmahal

CHORUS:

Ako ay Pilipino,/Ako ay Pilipino/Isang bansa isang diwa/Ang minimithi ko/Sa Bayan ko't Bandila/Laan Buhay ko't Diwa/Ako ay Pilipino,/Pilipinong totoo/Ako ay Pilipino, Ako ay Pilipino/Taas noo kahit kanino/Ang Pilipino ay Ako!

AKO AY PILIPINO (I AM A FILIPINO)¹

I am a Filipino/With royal blood./In my heart naturally/(are) Beautiful desires/To the Philippines my country/Truly the Pearl of the Orient/Seemingly where the Almighty's wealth abound./The intelligence given to me/Is used purely for goodness; /To my countryman/To be ever-loving.

CHORUS:

I am a Filipino,/I am a Filipino./One nation, one spirit/Is what I fervently desire./To my country and flag/I offer my life and spirit./I am a Filipino,/A true Filipino./I am a Filipino,/I am a Filipino./Proud to (admit to) anyone/(that) The Filipino is me!

The lyrics of the song are impassioned declarations and strong attestations of the intense sense of Filipino identity. Performers who sang the song avowed to the Japanese, international, and the Filipino spectators as well that being a Filipino is great and honorable. As Labrador (2002) points out:

... to take pride in being Filipino means to recognize their marginal and minority status and to take steps in the direction of subverting the existing systems and structures of power. In this way, the cultural presentation can be seen as a project that strategically essentializes "Filipino" as part of efforts to develop solidarity and political mobilization in order to challenge the prevailing social order and hierarchy (p. 299).

¹ This is the English version of AKO AY PILIPINO. The translation was taken from this site: <http://filipinofolksongsatbp.blogspot.jp/2011/01/ako-ay-pilipino-filipino-patriotic-song.html>.

With a feeling of being a minority in a society with very few foreigners, Filipinos find ways, in this case through public performance of the *Bahay Kubo*, to purposefully place themselves in a cultural event in order to cultivate esprit de corps, engagement, and patronage amongst one another.

The *Bahay Kubo*: A Home

The advent of globalization and advancement of technology along with the exodus of people, travel and communication have become easier and faster these years as compared to the past. For these reasons, people are always on the go, and are never at home. The idea of a “home”, then, needs rethinking and further rationalizing especially in the case of dispersed individuals.

For travelers, exiles, labor migrants, and international students, the physical home is very far and distant. For these people, however, who have temporarily or permanently uprooted themselves from the homeland, a home as Berger (1984) explains is a “routine set of practices, a repetition of habitual interactions, in styles of dress and address, in memories and myths, in stories carried around in one’s head” (as cited in Rapport and Dawson, 1998, p. 7). The *Bahay Kubo* performance, then, was an embodiment of a home that narrated stories of cultures and traditions. It served perhaps as a cognitive or imagined home among Filipino migrants. The then FAST President, John Maninang, further elucidates:

For one, the *Bahay Kubo* is the title and first phrase of the song almost all Filipinos sing, if not earlier than, ABC in our childhood days. This is short of saying almost each Filipino can relate to this symbol and the nostalgic feeling that comes along with it. More importantly, the *Bahay Kubo* pictures a Filipino home. Home is an all-encompassing theme where we can talk of food, Filipino past time (i.e. songs and dances), values (i.e. hospitality), and family love (personal communication, April 15, 2009).

The *Bahay Kubo* production presented not only the cultural pride of Filipinos, but brings forth also the idea of “home orientation and return” (Espiritu, 2008, p. 3). This home may not be an actual geography, but an imagined “home” away from home. The important thing here is that the home is both connected to and disconnected from the physical space in which one lives. It is connected in the sense that through the *Bahay Kubo*, Filipino migrants are able to “return” home – a notion and the desire – through imagination. It is disconnected in the sense that Filipinos have relocated themselves from their birthplace. Hamid Naficy (1999), a scholar in cultural studies, defines home “as any place; it is temporary and it is moveable; it can be built, rebuilt, and carried in memory and by acts of imagination” (p. 6). Beinvenido Santos (1982), a Filipino-American writer, meanwhile, prompts: “All exiles want to go home. Although many of them never return, in their imagination they make their journey a thousand times” (p. 11). Maninang, in the interim, poignantly states: “An internationally known song entitled “home” popularized by Whitney Houston fits well here: “when I think of home I think of a place where there is love overflowing, I wish I was home, I wish I could go back there””.

For Filipinos who have uprooted themselves from their homeland either for economic, political or personal reasons, the *Bahay Kubo* reminded them of the love that cradled them during their formative years, and how they wished and longed to go back home one day. According to Maninang, “this warmth of Filipino love first experienced at home is what we would like to showcase by using the *Bahay Kubo* as a symbol”. This return may not be a physical return but a return in their minds and hearts, and with the power of imagination, they have essentially returned “home” several times.

People who have moved or migrated bring with them not only physical possessions but also memories of the home. As writer Anzaldúa (1987) puts it in *Bordelands*: “I am a turtle, wherever I go I carry “home”

on my back” (p. 21). And this so called “home” is forged further in the *Bahay Kubo* since it gave the venue for Filipinos to converge, congregate, and reminisce the time while they were still in the Philippines. Accordingly, a home, may it be physical or imagined, is very important for all of us. It gives us the solid ground, our core and foundation.

Fundamentally, the *Bahay Kubo* perfectly denotes a “home”, as it is literally a type of house in the Philippines used primarily for shelter and refuge. Just like the *Bahay Kubo*, now transported in Japan, it also served its purpose as a sanctuary for Filipinos in Tsukuba – to feel at “home” again! For some of us, being in Japan becomes the destination already while for others, it is homeward-bound for the Philippines again. Either way, the *Bahay Kubo* afforded the space for diasporic Filipinos for a place like home.

Conclusion: Performing Filipinism

The case of *Bahay Kubo* as a cultural production and public performance provided us, Filipino migrants in Tsukuba the manifesto to tell our own stories about who and what we are. It also gave us the prospect to fundamentally fashion how we want to be viewed and heard by others. Making our cultural presence felt is the primordial concern of Filipinos in a place where we feel, somehow that, we are in the margin or periphery.

It also fueled consciousness-raising and cultural pride amongst us. Truly, I can say that, the *Bahay Kubo* has strengthened the Filipino community’s bond as well as guaranteed racial/ethnic and cultural repossession amongst us.

Performing Filipinism in the *Bahay Kubo* provided Filipinos cultural visibility and value. Through the public presentation of *Bahay Kubo*, it configured points of cultural (re) awareness and identity (re) development.

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