

## Exhibition Review

### ***INABEL: Philippine Textile from the Ilocos Region***

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The exhibition INABEL by Balay ni Atong, which opened at the Ayala Museum in Makati City in late 2015, and ran until January 2016, was a showcase of Ilocano *inabel*, mostly from northern Ilocos. It presented a dignified rendering of a traditional artisanal practice, with a distinctly forward-looking approach to heritage that bolsters the hope to save the weaving practice from oblivion. The exhibit rehearsed the many facets and issues concomitant to heritage, and in the process, recontextualized the *inabel* by emphasizing its contemporary possibilities. The exercise in recontextualization is key to heritage and its preservation. The exhibition also lent itself to readings informed by the material turn, which befits and benefits projects to resignify heritage.

The *inabel* is a term used to designate “hand-woven fabric of cotton and other natural fibers from the Ilocos region,” as stated on the exhibition title board. The introductory text to the exhibition succinctly encapsulated the context in which the textiles were to be viewed. Quite appropriately, the narrative leaned on the metaphor of a tapestry, weaving in history, technique, and the labor of artisans. The tapestry metaphor found a graphic and physical expression within the exhibition in the works of Atong Valenciano. Valenciano, a visual artist and designer, turned various *inabel* swatches and fragments into patchwork, interspersed with stylized images of the weavers from Paoay and Abra. The patchwork tapestry memorialized the weavers, as some of them, like Aida Fernandez of Paoay had already passed away in 2007. The introductory information likewise traced the provenance of the exhibited pieces to Balay ni Atong, an organization that spearheads the documentation and promotion of contemporary renderings of the Ilocano weaving tradition.

INABEL was a fine work of exhibition-making that foregrounded the many aspects of heritage and its preservation. As a traditional artisanal practice, *inabel* weaving properly falls under what the UNESCO Convention of 2003 defines as “intangible

cultural heritage” (ICH) constituted by “the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups, and in some cases, individuals, recognize as part of their cultural heritage” (UNESCO 2003, Art. 2, par. 1). Previous formulations of cultural heritage were static definitions, limited to monumental and tangible structures defined in the 1972 World Heritage Convention that sought to inscribe particular structures—both natural and man-made—into the World Heritage Sites list as worthy of preservation (Ruggles and Silverman 6). UNESCO expanded the notion of heritage to include the intangible to address the criticism of the emphasis placed on “monumental” heritage that downplays the non-monumental forms of heritage that include traditional cultural practices existing in small-scale and indigenous societies, and which are nonetheless integral to these societies’ sense of heritage and identity (Harrison 206). Irene Marcos Araneta, one of the patrons of the exhibition, harkened to this connection between the inabel and a sense of identity in her aspiration displayed on the exhibition vitrine that read: “I hope the time will come when the Filipinos will not only recognize inabel as a beautiful textile, but also value it as a modern and practical expression of our national identity.”

Demonstrating intangible cultural heritage that is the inabel tradition, the exhibition clearly situated inabel’s place in local history and folklore. A scale model of a boat with inabel sails provided a visual display of a documented fact in history. An excerpt from the Ilocano epic *Biag-ni-Lam-ang* referenced the inabel and how skill at weaving made for a respectable maiden. In muted tones were the different techniques printed on the vitrine surfaces that floated over the spectacle of the fabrics. Plain weaves of *kantarinis* and *binakol*, and supplementary weft weaves called *pinilian*, *insukit*, and *imapalagto* are techniques that were featured, albeit briefly described. These weaving methods have survived into the present—displayed on textiles unrolled in the vertical glass encasements along the museum’s stairwell exhibition space. Installed were not only fabric dropping down more than 15 feet of vertical space but several yards of the fabric sitting on the exhibition floor in thick reels, as if suggesting that this material, and by extension this tradition, “has a long way to go.” We have more to say about this on the agency of objects and the “material turn” later on.

INABEL presented the traditional textile and practice in a recontextualized setting. A project like this situated itself quite rightly in a museum environment where objects and ideas are afforded an occasion for expansion and redefinition (Bonnetti 169; Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 410-13; Vogel 201). INABEL leaned securely on inabel weaving traditions, on a reference to weaving in folk Ilocano literature, and failed

not to recognize the practitioners (in stylized representations). However, it refrained from technical language and an attempt to educate the audience on the material culture that accompanies a time-honored artisanal practice through a presentation of tools and paraphernalia, or the fiber types and dyes that a discussion on artisanal textile production frequently entails. Rather, a mannequin dressed in haute-couture ensemble constructed from inabel fabrics and Valenciano's patchwork tapestries offered contemporary possibilities that achieved more than mere suggestions on future projects with the inabel. These two works implied a recasting of the inabel using a contemporary, including haute-couture mold as a path toward its longevity. While the reference to tradition was present, its inclusion was almost as an inevitable backdrop to the weaving practice. More strongly and powerfully resounding was the perceived and demonstrated capacity of the inabel to cross contemporary borders and quite possibly to comfortably settle in that milieu. Save for the references to history and the Ilocano epic, the exhibition aesthetics framed the inabel as a heritage object and practice with a distinct future. Here lies the tension inherent in heritage projects: the dependence and reliance on tradition on one hand, and a future orientation, on the other. In INABEL we found a happy tension, mediated by an exercise in recontextualization. Inabel was presented as a handmade product invested with the force of history and artisanal skill, but repackaged and served up in a manner that is informed by present tastes and artistic sensibilities. It would be interesting to note however, that as early as the mid-2000s, the late master weaver Aida Fernandez, had experimented on contemporary forms of inabel by herself creating tapestries. These tapestries were being sold in the Museo Ilocos Norte shop. A sample of it was also exhibited at the Museo ng Kalinangang Pilipino's exhibition titled "Manlilikha" in 2005 at the Cultural Center of the Philippines.

Such a recontextualization is what heritage causes require to ensure that the past is creatively carried over into the present and future. Heritage, as preservationists and scholars are wont to agree on, is not a confinement to the past and tradition but rather a living recreation and renewal of the past as a resource (Alivizatou 48). This is what is vital to heritage preservation: a re-imagination of tradition that re-invents and recreates it not only for the here and now, but also for upcoming generations. Harrison considers heritage as a "creative engagement with the past in the present," and for this reason is to be viewed not as stasis and a passive process of "simply preserving things from the past that remain, but an active process of assembling a series of objects, places, and practices that we choose to hold up as a mirror to the present, associated with a set of values that we wish to take with us into the future" (4). Creativity is key. Heritage benefits from innovative and exciting ways to apprehend tradition by a skillful organization and mobilization of the past, materials,

expertise and experience, and a commitment to carry the past into the present, not as a mere preserve, but as a “product” that can be consumed and enjoyed in the present and beyond. Heritage keeping, while strongly resonating with history and history-making and its attendant features, is, according to Harrison, increasingly reckoned to include a broad range of other constituencies that are involved in the production of the past in the present (5). In INABEL we find that while the Ilocano weavers are explicitly paid tribute to on the exhibition premises, one understands that there are more players in the production and re-imagining of inabel demonstrated in the show than meets the eye. The roster that named the people behind the exhibition was a testament to the multidisciplinary fields and interests responsible for the production not only of inabel exhibited but INABEL the exhibition, and the particular treatment and reading accorded this weaving tradition. In the list were stalwarts of historical and anthropological research, distinguished members of Ilocano culture and society, leading government and private cultural organizations, and collectors. Added to this list is Balay ni Atong, an organization headed by Al Valenciano whose contemporary tapestries and inabel are on display in the exhibition. Balay ni Atong is animated by an entrepreneurial spirit that aspires for the promotion of inabel not only for the local market but for export. It has been a participant in Manila FAME events. Valenciano and Balay ni Atong products are featured in the New York-based Asia Society store (Asia Society, “AsiaStore Blog”). Inabel’s constituencies obviously go beyond the weavers and their families who derive their self-support and livelihood from inabel production. It would be safe to infer that these constituencies have varying degrees of investments in the production of the exhibition in particular, and in the preservation of inabel in general.

What INABEL achieved is a project that resembles what Canclini refers to as a “resignification of heritage” (36). Canclini alludes mainly to monuments and built forms of heritage that are incorporated into urban, commercial, or popular uses, and which result in changing heritage’s cultural meaning. The notion gains purchase in relation to inabel as intangible cultural heritage. The introduction of inabel to a contemporary visual art genre as in Valenciano’s project resignifies heritage, thus enabling it to cross borders between traditional and contemporary art, and as a result, modifies its cultural value. INABEL re-theorizes heritage in the sense suggested by Kearney (qtd. in Smith and Akagawa 6) to accomplish the task of bringing recognition to intangible heritage, which may be constrained by the existing assumptions and definitions about its nature and value. Again, re-casting a traditional weaving practice into a present and living form of artistic and commodified production is to break a common perception of heritage as under threat of extinction, struggling to survive into the present because of a deficiency of properties that would render it fit to thrive in the present. When inabel is allowed to accommodate

a form of art-making (or is it the art-making accommodating inabel?), the artisanal practice is afforded a second life, one that is not the usual or accustomed manner of rendering the material. Inabel takes on another function and use.

INABEL also lends itself to literature by scholars of the “material turn” who maintain that objects and things possess an innate power to impinge on people beyond any prior cultural meaning or context apprehended by humans (Bennett 5; Dudley 1). Bennet refers to this as “thing-power,” which she describes as “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” (6). Dudley recognizes the capacity of objects to speak to us and to move us, without prior knowledge about the object (11). The presence of the rolled yards of inabel, more than simply displaying technique and product, communicates far more than what any narrative could stress. The rolled yards of inabel is suggestive of abundance: “there is a long way to go,” or “there is more where this came from.” The massive rolls, communicating abundance, mischievously subvert the concept of intangible cultural heritage in that while heritage objects or practices are commonly acknowledged to be under threat, the display of the dense inabel reels implies security of supply. Without knowledge of any prior context in which the inabel was framed in the exhibition, one who appreciates things qua things or artefacts qua artefacts as in the writing of Bjornar Olsen (37) and Amiria Henare (5), respectively, one approaches objects as they are, respecting the properties of these objects in situ. The rolled inabel, approached as such, would suggest such notions of abundance and stability, not extinction.

Material turn advocates are wont to affirm that on their own, objects can perform labor. Bennett (2-3, 5) attributes this power inherent in objects to their material vitality—in this case, the colors, the texture, the volume and dimensions of inabel—in short, by their sheer material properties alone, objects have the ability to capture our attention and imagination. By INABEL presenting the fabrics the way it did, the textiles work to captivate and arrest the viewer, and deliver a message of abundance, exuberance, contemporary possibilities, and future niche. By an appropriation of the inabel into haute-couture and visual art-making, its material vibrancy and vitality are amplified. It is, however, significant to note how the exhibition was complicit in creating this condition. Material agency here on the part of inabel to call attention and communicate to a public was aided by the exhibition. Hence, while we attribute material vitality to the inabel in a particular moment and context as singled out in this exhibition, what Alfred Gell (17) attributes to objects as “secondary agency” cannot be denied. Gell attributes primary agency to humans still, who possess intention; and to objects secondary agency. Within an art-making context, while viewers of a tapestry can respond to an artwork in awe and wonder, this reaction

was elicited by the physical qualities of the tapestry by virtue of the exhibition objects' secondary agency, since it is still the human artist who holds primary responsibility for organizing the artistic elements and design principles in the artwork.

Between the strongly material turn advocates and Gell, scholars would recognize a wide divide. Bennett (2-5) and Olsen (37) are wont to attribute labor to objects *per se*, owing to matter's vitality and properties, independently of humans. On the other hand, Gell's notion of object agency is contingent on human agency. In this review, however, I theorize how it is possible to further break down a spectacle such as the INABEL and the work that the exhibited object performed, on its own—by what an apprehension of what an installed object *per se* directly conveys singularly; and to view that object in relation to an orchestrated whole. When one considers the inabel as a component of a production, one can employ Gellian notions of secondary agency which he conceived of within the framework of art and artworks.

The recontextualization that occurs in INABEL takes at least two forms. One is by way of representing the inabel as a practice, and *abel* as a product with contemporary applications in fashion and the visual arts.\* The second manner by which inabel is recontextualized is by way of the relationship that the *abel* achieves with the viewing audience. In the sense that Bonnetti (169) apprehends museum exhibitions, she observes that every person who views an exhibition, by the manner with which s/he examines and looks at the exhibited object, relates to the exhibited object each time differently, and by doing so re-creates an object's context. For instance, an exhibited object although displayed statically, need not be viewed statically. The educated viewer's eye can follow the lines of the motif, or trace the silhouette of the object. For this reason, the object is not really stationary but "moves" and may even be capable of rhythm. This second sense of recontextualization is greatly aided by an installation of the fabrics that allows the close examination of motifs and possibility of touching the fabric. The latter, however, would mostly be frowned upon by exhibitionary practice with conservation principles in mind.

Heritage projects benefit from efforts to recontextualize heritage objects and tradition. Recontextualization befits tradition and objects that, by virtue of its strong association with the past, oftentimes struggle to claim a place in contemporary sensibilities and the future. The resignification of heritage becomes an inevitable project for any heritage advocacy to have a chance at success. To resignify heritage is to explore the ways by which heritage can be made to engage with the present, to be accepted in the present, with the hope of thriving in the future. INABEL demonstrates how this endeavor is highly plausible.

The notions proffered by literature that advocate a “return to things” (Olsen 22) or a sensitivity to the thingness and material properties of things suggest a promising route to take on the way to heritage preservation. By being attentive to the object’s material attributes, even sans any preconceived and prior understanding of the function, or provenance or production of the heritage object itself, the viewer could open him/herself to a relational encounter with the object. In this way, the heritage object might be reckoned in a new light and appreciated on a realm that might not necessarily depend on the force of history or tradition. If the resignification of heritage means that heritage is made to engage with cultural forms that transform its meaning altogether, could a sensitivity to heritage objects that places the object’s heritage value on hold for the meantime, for the object to be firstly regarded on the level of its materiality count as a resignification of heritage? It would seem so, and might plough a new furrow in the cause of keeping heritage.

## ENDNOTE

- \* While both words refer to the Ilocano handloom woven cloth, the term “abel” is the more generic of the two; “inabel” carries with its usage the weight of the characteristic attributes of an Ilocano abel—strictly made of cotton, well-woven, and with straight-neat edges (INABEL: Philippine Textile 172).

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