

Making Worlds: The Sea, the Ship, and Slavery

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I begin this presentation with three images to discuss piracy as a kind of world making, one that is shaped in tension with concepts of order, structure, limits, and hierarchies. Piracy presents at the outset a kind of trouble and a kind of threat. Its habits depend so much on the poaching, encroaching, and testing of the tenacity of territories and boundaries. Thus, it also relies on keeping points of contact always emergent, never fully formed, or under the constant peril of being undone, infringed, dispossessed, and sometimes radically transformed by illicit possibilities. It is in an exceptional state of play, circulation, improvisation, and strategy.

These images are framed in the context of Philippine history, but as we will realize in the course of my discussion, the persistence of the imagination of the nation-state as the source of distinction and origin is dispersed through and across an equivalent history of piracy. I approach these images as an art historian and a curator of contemporary art working on various Philippine materials who is trying to offer another trajectory for representing historical circumstances and consequences without reducing them to the norm of identity. Piracy tends to be a provocative proposition in this project. I constellate these images as a curator of contemporary art, and I thus take liberties in moving across timelines so as to sketch out a situation in which history / the historical is re-experienced as a sensorium in a contemporary context. This I think is the potential of the curatorial: not to merely represent the particular and turn it into the typical but to prefigure what Michel Foucault would call “the sudden vicinity of things.”¹

First is the image of the Iranun or Ilanun pirate, a prominent figure in the southern region of the Philippines. It is difficult to confine this domain to the jurisdiction of the Philippines. James Francis Warren, in fact, names this geopolitical and ultimately geopoetic space the “Sulu zone.”² According to one scholar, “the Illanuns were the fiercest and most powerful pirates of the Eastern seas” in the 18th century. He continues: “The Illanuns were accustomed to cruise in squadrons thirty or forty strong, although at times a fleet might number 200 vessels of different sizes.” For them, piracy was a “hereditary career and the most honourable they could pursue” and “their cruising grounds were not limited to the Sulu Archipelago, but they would range through the whole of the Malayan seas, and a single cruise, lasting sometimes as long as three years, might take them east through the Philippines, round New Guinea, and then along the coasts of Java and Sumatra as far as the Bay of Bengal, and home by way of Penang and the Borneo coast.”³

¹ Michel Foucault, “Preface,” in *The Order of Things* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1978), xvii.

² James Francis Warren, *The Sulu Zone, 1768–1898: The Dynamics of External Trade, Slavery, and Ethnicity in the Transformation of a Southeast Asian Maritime State* (Singapore: NUS Press, 1981), xiii.

³ Jim Warren, “‘Who were the Balangingi Samal?’ Slave Raiding and Ethnogenesis in Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 37, no. 3 (1978): n.p.

The historian Warren provides a wide framework for the Ilanun pirate through a conceptualization of a Sulu zone—a *zone*, not a country or a region. We should note that the category of the colony, the post-colony, and the nation is displaced by the category of the zone. The Sulu Zone, according to Warren, is “created through the intersections of geography, culture and history centered on the Sulu and Celebes seas, as well as China’s and the West’s complicated place within it.”⁴ He continues: “The southern Chinese border was forced open to the West in the 1840s, but new ‘borders’ had already been forged or imposed in the Sulu region and elsewhere in eastern Indonesia because of the China connection and economic conditions in that particular area. While captive labor power from all across Southeast Asia was introduced into the zone’s space, comprising the Sultanate’s fisheries and tropical forests, the boundaries of its economy, culture, and ecology were increasingly blurred by the rhetoric and practice of global trade, cultural pluralism and Western imperialism.”⁵

The Sulu Zone “constituted a Southeast Asian economic region with a multi-ethnic pre-colonial Malayo-Muslim state, and an ethnically heterogeneous set of societies of diverse political backgrounds and alignments that could be set within a stratified hierarchy of kinship-oriented stateless societies, maritime nomadic fishers and forest dwellers.”⁶ Warren concludes that “the Sulu sultanate is an important case study of an island entrepot state that suddenly grew over several decades from being a secondary principality based on fishing and ‘piracy,’ located on the eastern edge of island Southeast Asia, into one of the most powerful and important pre-colonial trading states of the entire Malayo-Muslim zone of Southeast Asia.”⁷ The intention of Warren is to represent the “ethnohistory of the Sulu zone on its own terms from the late 18th century, rather than merely as a corollary of the history of Western imperial expansion in Eastern Asia.”⁸ This reframes our sense of history of trade and ecology: “Slavery and the accomplishment of ethnicity had virtually become the very basis of organized society in the Sultanate.”⁹

This history of piracy continues to shape the present world. According to a study, “piracy and armed robbery against ships . . . for the past 12 years have victimized approximately 4,000 persons and 1,500 vessels and have seized hundreds of million pesos in properties.”¹⁰ In Southeast Asia, it has significantly accelerated and one insurer had even declared it a “war zone.”¹¹ It is interesting to note that another type of piracy has been formed involving the Malayo-Muslim world and Chinese hegemony, once again foregrounding the Sulu zone as a theater of prolific circulations. According to the study of Tilman Baumgartel, pirated movies that flood the Philippine market come from two sites: China and Malaysia. His research

⁴ James Warren, “The Global Economy and the Sulu Zone: Connections, Commodities and Culture,” in *Sea Changes: Historicizing the Ocean*, eds. Bernhard Klein and Gesa Mackenthun (Hove, UK: Psychology Press, 2004), 58.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid, 59.

⁷ Ibid, 60.

⁸ Ibid, 62.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Helmut Tuerk, “The Resurgence of Piracy,” in *Reflections in the Contemporary Laws of the Sea* (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2012), 85.

¹¹ Ibid.

illustrates how these goods “are brought into the country by the most inconspicuous, humble means. Often it is via the boats of fishermen, that travel the Mindanao Sea, the Sulu Sea and the Moro Gulf, the area between Mindoro and the Malaysian Island of Borneo.”¹² On the other hand, Baumgartel continues, “the ‘Chinese Connection’ in the Philippines operates slightly differently.”¹³ The goods “usually come from Hong Kong, sometimes from Singapore. Often the couriers are unsuspecting looking, young women, coming into the country as tourists by plane. They typically hide the disks in their luggage, often in bags with other, legal DVDs and CDs. In another method, the disks are hidden in big boxes of clothes, which are imported into the Philippines. Once these disks reach Manila, they are manufactured like the ones coming from the ‘Muslim Connection.’”¹⁴

An analysis of this place as a zone configured by piracy has to begin by revisiting previous representations of Sulu derogatorily as a lair of pirates. Warren points to Sir Stamford Raffles and James Brooke’s reports on Malay piracy, “portraying Sulu as the scourge of the seas from Singapore to Papua.”¹⁵ But according to Warren, this piracy was generative: Ethnic groups in the Sulu Archipelago were “emergent populations”¹⁶; the feasible practice of some of them “as slave raiders was due in large measure to their ethnic heterogeneity.”¹⁷ Warren further notes that Sulu was “an ‘emergent society’ increasingly composed of captives and their descendants who were brought to the Sulu Archipelago and in many cases assimilated within a single generation to become the predators of their own people.”¹⁸ This ethnoscape encompassed an extensive ground, “reaching from the Bay of Bengal in the west and the Timor and Arafura Seas in the south, throughout the central and northern Philippines, across the South China Sea, and it touched the homelands of diverse distant indigenous groups in the south of Cochin China and in western parts of northern Australia.” Based on these claims, Warren is able to assert that “the transformation of the West and China and the rise of the Iranun in modern Southeast Asian history cannot be separated: each is the other’s history.”¹⁹

The second image of this presentation is Limahong, the Chinese pirate who is known as Lin Feng in China and Lee Mao Huang in the Japanese annals. He was born in the second half of the 16th century in Kwantung Province, China, lived by piracy along Chinese coasts, plundered coastal towns, occupied Tonsua Islands (which lie between China and Luzon). In 1574 he started to attack the northern part of a Spanish colony (which would eventually be called the Philippines) and burned Manila, but was not able to conquer it. He moved back to the north (Pangasinan), and attempted to connive with the Spaniards to take over China. He escaped the Philippines and set sail for China in 1575. The historical accounts on Limahong

¹² Tilman Baumgartel, “The Culture Piracy in the Philippines,” *Pilipinas: A Journal of Philippine Studies* 45 (2005): 24.

¹³ Ibid, 23.

¹⁴ Ibid, 27.

¹⁵ Warren, “Patterns of Raiding,” in *The Sulu Zone*, 148.

¹⁶ Ibid, 184.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid, 254.

¹⁹ James Francis Warren, *Iranun and Balangingi: Globalization, Maritime Raiding and the Birth of Ethnicity* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2002), 12.

are quite sketchy and may have been laced with lore. I include him in this discussion because he signifies the Chinese threat within the narrative of Spanish colonialism in the Philippines, as well as because the imagination of his persona and figuration has intrigued Philippine historians and artists. These include the nineteenth century artist Felix Hidalgo as well as Carlos Francisco, the country's foremost post-war muralist who created a significant body of historical mural work. His depiction of Limahong bears an uncanny resemblance to his own evocation of Genghis Khan some years earlier.

This brings us to the third image of this presentation, Genghis Khan. When I curated the Philippine Pavilion of the Venice Biennale in 2015, Genghis Khan was a central image. This image was based on that found in a film on him made in the Philippines in 1950 and screened in Venice in 1952. If I am not mistaken, this is the first film ever made on Genghis Khan. The Philippine Pavilion was titled *Tie a String Around the World*, a line taken from the film's final scene in which the Emperor tells his beloved that he would "tie a string around the world"²⁰ and lay it at her feet. As a curator, I was interested in a history of modernity and world making through the film, and I tried to relate it to the situation in the South China Sea, a significant part of which China wants for itself and that the Philippines is contesting in the international courts. I think Genghis Khan as an image cuts across concerns of world making in the early modern period and in the present time.

Take note, for instance, how in 2013, the Chinese President addressed the Indonesian Parliament in Jakarta and unveiled a vision of the Maritime Silk Road of the 21st century. Xi Jinping stated, "The sea is big because it admits all rivers. . . . Southeast Asia has since ancient times been an important hub along the ancient Maritime Silk Road."²¹ This map of relations significantly relies on Southeast Asia as an intersection of the geographic, and on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as the node of the geopolitical. The Chinese Institute of International Studies of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs points to the resolution of the Third Plenum to stress that China "needs to enhance opening-up in coastal regions and boost the connectivity construction with neighboring countries and regions to spur all-round opening-up."²² Resting on this premise, through the Maritime Silk Road of the 21st century the country "will further unite and expand common interests between China and other countries situated along the route. . . . The Maritime Silk Road will extend southward from China's ports, through the South China Sea, the Straits of Malacca, Lombok and Sunda and then along the north Indian Ocean to the Persian Gulf, Red Sea and Gulf of Aden."²³

The Venice Biennale's Philippine Pavilion pivots around the Genghis Khan film. The film is the point at which two contemporary projects are coordinated to imagine the world and the modes of its conquest as shown by the epic life of Genghis Khan.

²⁰ *Genghis Khan*, directed by Manuel Conde (Pasig: MC Productions, 1950), n.d.

²¹ "Speech by Chinese President Xi Jinping to Indonesian Parliament," ASEAN China Centre, http://www.asean-china-center.org/english/2013-10/03/c_133062675.htm, accessed on October 10, 2016.

²² Liu Cuigi, "Reflections on Maritime Partnership: Building the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road," China Institute of National Studies, http://www.ciis.org.cn/english/2014-09/15/content_7231376.htm, accessed on October 10, 2016.

²³ Ibid.

At a tangent to Genghis Khan, the work of Jose Tence Ruiz titled *Shoal* included in the Pavilion references the ship named Sierra Madre. *The New York Times* describes it as a vessel of Vietnam War vintage that “the Philippine government ran aground on the reef in 1999 and has since maintained as a kind of post-apocalyptic military garrison, the small detachment of Filipino troops stationed there struggling to survive extreme mental and physical desolation.”²⁴ Ruiz evokes the spectral ship as an ambivalent silhouette of a shoal, or a submerged sand bar, through his assemblage of metal and velvet. According to the artist it is a “slum fortress,” a shipwreck that is also the country’s only presence in a disputed sea. Like its reference, it appears plundered, divested, stripped bare. But on the other hand, it is textured, dense, a warship that can also be a cathedral or a gondola in Venice. Incidentally, the ship was used in 1945 in the assault of Okinawa Gunto before it served in Vietnam.

Another work in the Pavilion was the multi-channel video titled *A Dashed State*. In this piece, artist Manny Montelibano explores the creeping sound of radio picked up from China as a kind of an intruding atmosphere that has pervaded the Philippines. This territorial intrusion in the climate, like water in water in the words of George Bataille, is in many ways piratical, or sustained by the instincts of piracy, undermining the ecological and economic well-being of the Philippine people who live by the sea, depriving them of their entitlement to what should be a shared world of water like the Mediterranean, for instance, as imagined by Fernand Braudel. Layered over this drone of radio, which rendered as a micropolyphony, is another sonic experience provided by the epic of the place from which the scenes are taken. It becomes an equivalent drone that is disrupted by Chinese sound and yet refuses to be drowned out by its pervasive and vexing frequency.

My aim in this presentation was to contribute to the conversation on piracy and its role in making worlds through ethnogenesis, cosmology, and globalization. It tried to examine the conditions of the emergence of the early modern world through the three figures of the Iranun pirate, the Chinese corsair Limahong, and the Mongol master conqueror Genghis Khan.

²⁴ Jeff Himmelman, “A Game of Shark and Minnow,” *The New York Times Magazine*, <http://www.nytimes.com/newsgraphics/2013/10/27/south-china-sea/>, accessed on October 10, 2016.