

Cultural Myth Restatement and Conversation in Social Media: The Case of the Viral Digital Photo and Memes of Mt. Mayon Eruption

Crisanto Q. Regadio Jr.

De La Salle University

Page | 55

This discourse analysis on the cultural myth production of Mt. Mayon centered on the scrutiny of the viral photograph, meme, and comments on a post about the volcanic eruption in 2018. One of the major insights generated from this dissection is that an out-of-the-ordinary captured image of a disaster could ignite the process of retelling a cultural myth. A photograph caught the attention of netizens because the generated plume of ash bore semblance to Daragang Magayon and Panganoron, two beings featured in the myth of Mt. Mayon. The digital image was enhanced in memes by replacing the cloud formation with the caricature of the two lovers. The “volcanic eruption” was overshadowed by the visual reconstruction of the plume of ash formation. When the meme was posted with the original story, it generated hundreds of thousands of comments, some with “romantic vocabularies” (e.g., unfortunate lover, undying love); hence, the “myth of Mt. Mayon” was retold anew. Then again, this two-week frenzy on Magayon and Panganoron online revealed that social media could be a powerful platform for cultural myth restoration and regeneration. The one who created the post was the storyteller, and those who read it were the audience. However, unlike the other storytelling traditions, it was evident in this case that there was no clear storyteller or audience. The online discussion did not center on the myth, or the audience gravitated towards it. Instead, it became a game of tag and a stopgap space of entertainment and amusement. The digital artistic rendition and the viral post were a surface-level and ephemeral reconnection with a living tradition. On a more practical note, there was dissociation from the disruption in the livelihood and everyday life of the affected communities. It redirected the netizen’s perception of this disaster’s “real destructive” aftermath to their own hedonistic desire. In conclusion, this digital artistic rendition did not serve as a catalyst to initiate storytelling and to improve appreciation of our myths or to understand the impact of a disastrous event like a volcanic eruption. Still, it encapsulated the netizens in a bubble of hedonism disguised as nostalgic romanticism.

Keywords: volcanic eruption, cultural myth, Mt. Mayon, social media, local knowledge and belief system

Introduction

The inhabitants of the Philippine archipelago were divided into different geocultural communities that spoke a common language; established common habits, customs, traditions, morals, and values; and defined and redefined their worldviews through story-telling (*including the myths*), which marked a clear distinction with the other group, community, or society. This allowed the crystallization of local identities, which was commonly referred to as ethnic identity (see Bernard, 1971; in the different small islands (e.g., Waray, Masbate, Marinduque) and sections of the major islands (e.g., Pampango, Tagalog, Ilokano, etc) since the great wave of successive migrations from the north and the south. Myth then could be considered as one of the many forms of local knowledge and belief system tied with a geocultural community or

a territory with defined natural and cultural boundaries separating its inhabitants from other geocultural communities. Some of these geocultural communities were in Bicol, and the myth of Mt. Mayon was notable among their local knowledge and belief systems.

The 300 years of Spanish colonization broke the natural and cultural boundaries of the “barangays,” or “kadatuan” or the pre-colonial geocultural territories with the establishment of pueblos or towns connected by road and bridge systems (Chias & Abad, 2012; Doeppers, 1972). These resulted in political and economic transformation in the archipelago and changes in the other domains of social life. The socio-cultural divide was reduced by the introduction of a unifying religion, a powerful bridge that annexed pre-colonial communities into the banner of Roman Catholicism (Elizalde, 2022; Camba & Aguilar, 2022; Yengoyan, 2006; Pearson, 1969; Moses, 1904). The indoctrination and proselytization process that ensued was accompanied by the imposition of new myths and legends anchored on what was inscribed in the Bible. The precolonial knowledge and belief systems, including myths and legends, were not archived or documented (Eugenio, 1985) for other purposes but to expose their incompatibility with the biblical truth. The pre-colonial language survived, as well as the local knowledge and belief systems; thus, pre-colonial ethnic identities were not fully dissolved into the colonial identity. They transformed into localized identities by taking in the Spanish colonial influences and retaining the essential elements of their pre-colonial past. These local knowledge and belief systems, including myths, legends, fables, and idioms, were still told by grandparents, parents or shared at homes and in community rituals until the early years of American occupation (Fansler, 1921; Cole, 1916). This made it possible for the Americans to archive and document these oral traditions into a more academic and textual tradition.

The archiving and documentation of Filipino folklore were jump-started by American scholars (see Blair and Robertson, 1916; Cole, 1916; Benedict, 1916; Fansler, 1921; Ratcliff, 1951) and continued by Filipino scholars and folklorists (see Calleja-Reyes, 1968; Manuel, 1980; Eugenio, 1985). Then again, they were sourced from local informants through verbal retelling of the stories during individual or group interviews. This marked the transformation of Filipino folktales from oral tradition (Dundes, 1965) to textual tradition (Albuero, 1992). Unlike other local knowledge and belief systems, which were still dominantly oral, folktales became a subject for the emerging humanities and social disciplines in the Philippines (e.g., anthropology, history, literature). The local myths and folk tales had made their way to Filipino children through American-sponsored books (Netzorg, 1982). These myths and folktales also became an integral element of nation-building with the assumption that remembering the forgotten “national culture” or common knowledge and belief systems, regardless of ethnicity or race, could direct toward national identity consciousness (Mojares, 2006; Seki, 2001; Baumgartner, 1980; Eugenio, 1985). This was the same with the case of the Myth of Mt. Mayon, archived and documented in textual form and considered not only a Bicolano myth but a national folktale as well. The school became the primary space for storytelling, the books and other printed works (published or not) as an immortal vault, and the teachers, experts, and scholars as the chief dependable storytellers (see Mojares, 2006; Seki, 2001; Netzorg, 1982; Griffith 1954, 1924).

It was impossible to account for how much was lost. Still, it was possible to report what was collected and documented, thanks to the efforts of anthropologists, folklorists, scholars, educators, and journalists. This was in response to the dwindling of the oral storytelling tradition at home and in the community with more children spent time in school and other social activities (Hart & Hart, 1966) and the entry of new forms of entertainment like radio, television, comic books, and movies (Hart, 1980) which paved the way for a more invasive influence of Western modern and cosmopolitan worldview (Mojares, 2006). Arts and popular culture became the new form in preserving and propagating Filipino folklife and traditions.

Local knowledge systems were “reinvented” (see Herrero, 2006; Bobis, 1994; Maceda, 1971) or transformed from oral and textual to visual and performative forms which aligned with the changing socio-cultural and economic characteristics of the Philippines during this era. As such, the next generations of Filipinos who were urbanizing, modernizing, and embracing different ideologies were still acquainted with them. Renowned American scholars and folklorists (e.g., R.F. Barton, Dean S. Fansler, Luther Parker) contributed articles on myths and other folktales and legends in the “Philippine Magazine” (Marsella, 1969). Yet, komiks became unrivaled in popularity in Filipino households, maybe because they were a visual and cheap source of entertainment. The Philippine “komiks,” popularized in the 1930s to 1970s, were initiated by importing from Western sources. Still, in the course of their gaining a bigger market, one of the dominant themes that sustained them were local myths, epics, legends, and other folktales (Reyes, 2009, 1997; Lent, 1998) due to the writer’s fascination with Filipino heroes and heroines (Reyes, 2009). Theater plays performed heroes and heroines from legends (Alburo, 1985), or the myths and legends were modernized into musical or rock operas (Fernandez, 1993, 1983, 1980). In the earlier years of Philippine cinema, Jose Nepomuceno projected Filipino folklore in “Ang Lihim ni Bathala,” “Ang Manananggal,” and “Mang Tano: Nuno ng mga Aswang” (Tofighian, 2008). These supernaturals (e.g. aswang, engkanto, manananggal) are still the popular subject for a local feature film in the contemporary Philippine film industry (Corbital & Saministrado, 2019). The “balitao” in radio stations in Cebu (Alburo, 1985; Gutierrez, 1961) or the Ilocano “bucanegan,” and the Hiligaynon “composo” (Alburo, 1985). The myth of Mt. Mayon was no exception; it was transformed into a visual and performative tradition like some myths and other folktales (see Herrero, 2006; Crossman, 2002, 2001; Ventura, 1997). Notable contemporary transformations included Rico Gutierrez’s “Alamat ng Bulkang Mayon” episode in “Daig Kayo ng Lola Ko” and Alvin Yapan’s film titled “Devotion” in 2013. Nonetheless, the source of information on these performative and visual traditions was the archived textual form sourced from the salvaged oral traditions.

One thing was certain, though: in the post-war era up to the contemporary period, storytelling of myths and other Filipino folktales was no longer a popular pastime in Filipino households. Thus, it is a forgotten cultural fossil (Demetrio, 1978). A cultural artifact in books, journal articles, komiks, radio programs, shows, plays, and films. Acquaintance with them is still possible through some limited exposure in school (Jorolan-Quintero, 2018; Seki, 2001; Alburo, 1985) or when one is interested in spending time in the Filipiniana section of the library.

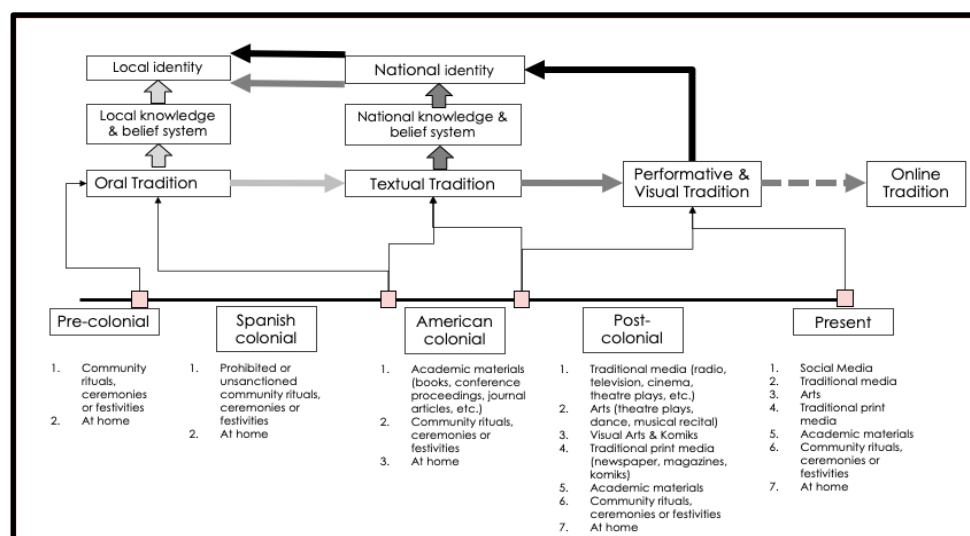


Figure 1: Storytelling traditions of Filipino Myth and other Folktales.

Do the internet and social media, which are considered at this stage of the fourth industrial revolution (4IR) as the dominant source of and medium for sharing information and platform for entertainment and establishing social relations, bring hope to the revival of Filipino myth and folktales?

The Viral Digital Photo

The viral photo was taken by Ciriaco Santiago III, a Redemptorist brother assigned in Legazpi City, Albay, and a freelance photojournalist (De La Cruz, 2018). In the photo below, the upper portion of the image is a clear sky; the bottom is greener scenery and what appears to be a creek; at the center, the Mayon Volcano is not visible, save for its left slope. The famous perfect cone is covered with a layer of white clouds on top and a dark gray plume of ash in the middle. The plume of ash barely resembles any human image; thus, there is nothing unusual about this photo. It is a clear-cut image of a minor volcanic unrest.

The next photo is zoomed in, and the plume of ash created by the minor volcanic eruption of Mt. Mayon dominates the entire canvas. Two human-like images could lead one to assume that the photo was edited. Yet, it was not. The left image of the plume of ash looks like a man leaning on his back and carrying the weight of the other image in a loving embrace. The right resembles an image of a woman with long hair and a tight, loving embrace, as compared to the other image. It is like Ulap and Daragang Magayon, and their romance manifested again.



Image source: <https://www.spot.ph/arts-culture/the-latest-arts-culture/72638/mayon-volcano-viral-photo-a00171-20180118>

Original image to be credited to Ciriaco Santiago III

The second photo was posted on Facebook by Neil Edward Diaz on January 17, 2018, and it was an edited version of the artwork by the illustrator Kerby Rosanes (Lasic, 2018). The sketch presents a visible image of the celebrated perfect cone of Mt. Mayon. The volcano is surrounded by what appears to be a cloud formation, with the lower portion shrouded in a

haze. In the original artwork, the two lovers are on top of the volcano, but in the meme, they are positioned at the spot where the plume of ash is in Santiago's photo. This reinforces the idea of the manifestation of Ulap and Daragang Magayon and that the volcanic eruption reminds us not to forget their tragic love affair.



Image source: <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10215373619476496&set=pcb.10215373652877331>
Original image to be credited to Neil Edward D. Diaz & Kerby Rosanes

The Myth of Mt. Mayon

Diaz's post included the myth of Mt. Mayon, which was sourced from the Local Government of Albay Pavillion, Philippine Travel Mart 2009:

Long ago in a place called Ibalon, there lived a beautiful maiden. Her name was Daragang Magayon (the lovely one). She was the daughter of Makusog (the strong one), chief of the tribe.

One day, Daragang Magayon strolled near the river. While crossing the river, she stumbled on a rock and fell quickly in the water. She was swiftly swept downstream by the current. "Help! Help me!" she cried. Fortunately, her cries were heard by Pangaronon (the proud one) and his bodyguard Amiham (the cold one). Pangaronon jumped into the river and saved Daragang Magayon.

"Thank you for risking your life to save me," she cried. "How can I repay you? My father is the chief of our tribe. Surely, he will reward your heroism, whatever it may take."

Her beauty immediately captivated Pangaronon. He realized that he had finally met the perfect woman for him. At the same time, Daragang Mayon was instantly attracted to him.

Pangaronon asked Makusog's permission to marry Daragang Magayon. But Makusog could not permit them to marry. Tribal law forbade marriage outside of the clan. As tribe leader, he had to enforce the law. Yet, as a father, he wanted to make his daughter happy.

Meanwhile, Patuga (the eruptive one) learned about Panganoron's intention. Patuga was the most ardent suitor of Daragang Magayon. For years, he had been convincing her to marry him, but to no avail.

One night, Patuga and his cohorts kidnapped Makusog. Then, he sent word to Daragang Magayon that her father would die if she did not marry him. Without a choice, she acceded. Only then did Patuga release Makusog. Soon Patuga and Daragang Magayon were wed. But in the midst of the merrymaking, pandemonium broke out when Panganoron and his men arrived. Fighting ensued between the two tribes. In a few minutes, Panganoron fatally struck Patuga. However, during the skirmish, a poisoned arrow shot from nowhere, fell on Daragang Magayon's breast.

Panganoron rushed to her aid, and as he kneeled over the dying Daragang Magayon, an enemy hacked his head off.

After the battle, Daragang Magayon was buried, and her death was mourned all over the land. Where she was put to rest, a mountain mysteriously appeared.

This mountain is now known as Mayon. It is said that even in death and in another form, she is still haunted by the men who loved her. When Mayon is said to erupt, this is Patuga challenging Panganoron. But when Mayon is calm, Panganoron is embracing her. The tears of Panganoron are shed as rain at times in his grief.

Until today, many are still delighted by the love story behind the legend of the Mayon Volcano.

The Social Media Attention

This viral post dominated different social media platforms during the first two days it was posted and lasted for a span of two weeks. It was shared at least three hundred twenty thousand times (328K) and gathered thirty-seven thousand seven hundred comments (37.7K). Also, it collected a total of two hundred eighty-seven thousand (287K) reactions with more than forty-seven thousand (47K) wows, seventy-two thousand (72K) loves, and one hundred sixty-six thousand (166K) likes. It was possible that when the post was shared by other people, it also collected several hundreds or thousands of comments and reactions.

The Online Conversation

I was expecting a conversation in the post's comment section, akin to storytelling. Wherein the original creator of the post served as the storyteller and the netizens the audience. The audience asked for more information, and the storyteller responded to each query. Thus deepening their knowledge and appreciation of the Myth of Mt. Mayon and its main characters. Nonetheless, there was no conversation, and what was evident was a "game of tag." Most of the comments were intended to tag a friend or a Facebook friend. These included the FB profile name or the full name of the one tagged, coupled with words like "ito yung sinasabi ko" (this is what I was talking about) and other similar phrases. Also, it is an expression of momentary emotional bliss where the users used words or phrases, some coupled with emoticons, to demonstrate their awe, amazement, and astonishment. The emotions were directed towards the coincidence that the plume of ash resembled human-like images of Ulap and Daragang Magayon. Some users verbalized their admiration; then again, there was no focal point of appreciation. They were directed to the viral photo or the illustration, the one who took the photograph, the original illustrator, or the one who edited the illustration. Very few addressed their admiration for the characters of the myth, the myth itself, or the Bicolanos. Others extended their gratitude to the one who shared the post, their friends who shared it with them

or those who tagged them, and the historians (folklorists) who they claimed did a good job preserving this myth. Most of these comments did not receive any response or reaction from the author of the post, the online friends they tagged and thanked, or other users.

The ones that piqued my interest the most were comments intended for fun. Each one was followed by another: the illustration caused the disaster, or no pathetic suitor, no eruption, at least Magayon has Ulap (as a lover), and they have none, or Magayon and Ulap had an early Valentine's day, and they were expecting none. It is as if, in a competition, netizens were motivated to generate the most reactions and laughter. The aforementioned comments, after all, generated more reactions and replies.

Very few users claimed that they were Bicolano or that they were proud of Bicolanos because they have the myth of Mt. Mayon. Some claimed that Bicolanos were beautiful people like Magayon, or an "oragon" like Ulap, who was brave and strong. Some comments from this group implied that they believed that the myth is real. They did not consider the human-like images as an accident or coincidence but the deliberate effort of the two lovers, Ulap and Daragang Magayon, to be known to the world. These met negative reactions or ridicule from others, saying they were delusional. Sometimes, they provided logical or scientific explanations, if not religious quotes or myths, for this coincidence. Some of those who proclaimed they believed in the myth dismissed the mockery. Such responses elicited anger coupled with rebuttals saying that these critics did not have the right to tell them what was real or not.

On the other hand, a portion of the comments expressed their sympathy to those who were affected by the natural disaster. Some were very much concerned about the insensitivity that dominated the comment section and those who found entertainment amidst the fact that people and animals' lives were in danger, livelihood and crops were damaged, and that the everyday life of the community near the volcano was greatly disturbed by the phreatic eruption.

The Aftermath of the Viral Social Media Attention

There was an increase in tourist arrival in Bicol during the first quarter of 2018 when the post became viral, according to the National Economic Development Authority Region V. Most of them wanted to witness the Mayon Volcano's abnormal activities or maybe took their chances of witnessing the plume of ash through the manifestation again of the two lovers. They were not concerned that the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology (PHILVOLCS) raised Mayon from alert level I (abnormal) to alert level IV (hazardous eruption imminent) (ReliefWeb, 2018). They found their way to Albay despite the closure of air traffic and cancellation of flights to Bicol (NEDA Region V, 2019). The influx was not observed in the previous two years or the remaining quarters of 2018 when the volcanic unrest subsided. Coincidentally, when no more extraordinary photos were taken, and Mt. Mayon calmed down, the online and tourist frenzy naturally died down. We next heard about Daragang Magayon when Catriona Gray won the Miss Universe beauty pageant in 2018 with the famous "lava walk."

Conclusion

In the case of Daragang Magayon, an out-of-the-ordinary image of a disaster captured the attention of social media users. The original post maximized this opportunity by posting the image coupled with the text of the myth. The viral post on the "myth of Mt. Mayon" revealed that social media could be a powerful platform for cultural myth transformation, preservation, and regeneration. The one who created the post was the storyteller, and those who read it were the audience, consequently, improving the knowledge and appreciation of the myth. Then again, to capture the attention of social media, one needs to offer something

extraordinary or relatable, such as a meme. In this case, the effective juxtaposition of the original photo with the edited sketch and the inclusion of the narrative of the myth in the post made it viral. However, the details of the myth were overshadowed by the meme and did not receive much attention to start a conversation. The online discussion did not center on the myth or the audience did not gravitate toward it. Instead, it became a game of tag and a stopgap space of entertainment and amusement. This digital artistic rendition did not serve as a catalyst to initiate storytelling and to improve appreciation of our myths. It was a surface-level and ephemeral reconnection with a living tradition. More practically, there was dissociation to the disruption in the livelihood and everyday life of the affected communities. It redirected the netizens' perception of this disaster's "real destructive" aftermath to their own hedonistic desire. It manifested in the real world with the influx of tourists in areas in Bicol where they could get a good look at the volcanic unrest. In conclusion, this case opened up a conversation on the power of social media to satisfy the netizens' hedonistic desires, which can disguise itself in the form of nostalgic romanticism.

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