

The Igorot triangulates, tarries beside a TV: An analysis of *Walang Rape Sa Bontok* and *Tokwif*

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In an interview with *Grid Magazine*, Lester Valle (2021) of Habi Collective Media, spoke of the importance of consent to their collective. It was the same principle they put to work in making the documentary *Walang Rape sa Bontok*. The process of asking for consent proposes to actualize an alternative relationship with the subjects of the film. Instead of the more typical “detached” relationship between subject and filmmaker, Valle stressed the need for the subjects to feel as if they are, and actually become, partners in the filmmaking. While the subjects get more involved in the process, the filmmakers are expected to immerse in, and be part of, the community. Valle frowns upon the “outside looking in” perspective, and instead calls for “liv[ing] within the world, [with] the people that you’re trying to represent” (Amistad, 2021, para. 22).

This complements Paula Saukko’s (2013) idea of “dialogic validity,” which pertains to “how well the researcher fulfills the ethical imperatives to be true to, and respect, other people’s lived world and realities” (p. 20). Respect is founded on, and helped by concrete experiences with the community, which in turn help researchers have a level of access to their daily life and realities. It is then these fragments of realities and ways of living that are made to cohere in the filmic product.

While in *Walang Rape sa Bontok* (Valle, 2014), the community is valued in the way it is framed as equal to, or as partners of, the filmmakers, and the chief source of documentary material, in the short film *Tokwif* (Ocampo,

2019), the community figures in prodding the plot, mainly revolving around Limmayug's encounter with Laura, and the larger encounters it metaphorizes. I would argue, then, that both films—one in terms of its filmmaking process and the other in terms of its story—offered critical and alternative venues for their indigenous subjects to be present and, more so, to present themselves. This departs from the truism that historically, visual media, specifically photography and film, have been allied with the colonial project. More deliciously put, *Walang Rape sa Bontok* and *Tokwif* confirm Marx's (1856) statement on how "everything seems pregnant with its contrary" (para. 3).

Bits from Valle's interview already cue the filmmakers' vision of a more collective filmmaking practice, one that engages its subjects, treats them as partners and co-researchers in the process. What I want to focus on is how this very vision is demonstrated in the films themselves. In other words, I will conduct a formalist analysis to show precisely how the filmmakers' professed predilection for a filmmaking that allows community participation has been put to work.

In *Walang Rape sa Bontok*, the community was made visible and valuable through what I would call visual triangulation. The basic yet bold and thought-provoking claim of the documentary is notable for shattering the simplicity and resignation of typical statements about rape culture. Statements could be victim-blaming or outright misogynist: "Nagsuot kasi siya nang ganito; kung kumilos kasi siya, parang nag-iimbita ng rape" [It's as if she was inviting rape with the way she's dressed, or the way she behaves].¹ Or they could be promoting helplessness and powerlessness: "Ganito na talaga sa atin, may rape culture. 'Pag babae talaga, prone na sa rape" [It is really the way things are, there is rape culture. Women are really just prone to rape].

In the face of statements naturalizing this injurious and violent rape culture, the documentary forwarded an unsettling and bold claim already implied in the title: it used to be that Bontok had no incidence of rape. The documentary listed six factors, obtained and synthesized from their interviews with community members, illuminating this situation and how it was sustained for a long time: (1) spiritual and moral beliefs, (2) physical structures, (3) tribal war, (4) the gender ideology, (5) perceptions on relationships, nakedness, and sex, and (6) community life (Valle, 2014).

One by one, these factors were elaborated through the interviews, and the way these interviews were juxtaposed with each other in the film testifies to the strength of visual triangulation. The basic flow was like this: one proposition was made, an idea was claimed, and these statements were shown to be spoken by multiple persons. This technique helped not just in

corroborating the claims, but also in qualifying or amplifying them, showing not just their veracity but the varied ways by which they were expressed by different people, the varied ways by which they have become meaningful or relatable to community members.

Regarding the physical structures, not exactly of individual Bontoc households but of an entire Bontoc community or *ili*, the notions of proximity and security and devaluing “privacy” were underscored, as seen in Figure 1. The proverbial “well-knit community” is shown both in individual houses having no locks and fences, and the physical proximity of these houses to one another. A different sense of security is also hinted here: not the commoditized sense—Protect your home from criminals, hurry, buy the foolproof 000 Security System!—but one founded in community trust and familiarity. It is less ironic than revealing that security is marked not by the excess of padlocks and walls but by their absence.

Figure 1.

Communal trust and security over privacy.



Note: Physical structures evince a well-knit community (Valle, 2014, 43:27-48:44).

Figure 2 describes the *olog*, the place where girls of “marriageable age” sleep together. Accented here was not just the sheer number of girls that can be in the *olog* at the same time but also how this situation has helped safeguard everyone from any form of sexual harassment or violence. Again, togetherness is valued over individual separation (no single rooms for each person) and this togetherness goes with a sense of shared responsibility, looking after one another.

Figure 2.

Various description of the olog



Note: The Olog helps in preventing cases of sexual violence (Valle, 2014, 49:58-54:03).

Figure 3.

The high valuation of women.



Note: The female genitalia is seen as a powerful source of life and protection (Valle, 2014, 01:10:54-01:11:38).

Finally, women were highly valued and this valuation is manifested and used during tribal wars. Figure 3 shows how the women embodied, and acted as shields, protecting the community from harmful outsiders. The female body thus helps in reproducing the community not just through its biological capacity (see Figure 4) but also through this protective power.

It is a wonder of research and filmmaking that these statements made by different people converse with, reaffirm, or prop up one another. Going against an individual “expert” talking, *Walang Rape sa Bontok* foregrounds the shared knowledge of various people, a shared knowledge stemming from a shared history and experience.



Figure 4.
Women highly valued.

Note: Women as source of life (Valle, 2014, 01:12:44).

While it is in the process and product of filmmaking that *Walang Rapesa Bontok* foregrounds the community, it is in the plot of *Tokwifi* that the community plays crucial roles. Tokwifi is the Kankanaey word for “star,” and the short film deftly teased out a double meaning out of this term—the celestial star, and the celebrity, the star of mass media. On the surface, the short film can be read as revolving around the relationship between Limmayug and Laura, the indigenous young man, and the TV/movie star, the “tokwifi” who fell from above (Ocampo, 2019). Yet a closer formal scrutiny would reveal elements—the Bontok tale, the Igorot blankets, even fire—that emphasized the community’s way of life.



Figure 5.
The chalikan.

Note: Young Limmayug clothes his grandpa (Valle, 2014, 02:23-02:25).

In the part when young Limmayug was asked by his grandmother to hand a blanket to his grandfather (see Figure 5), a community storytelling around the *dap-ay* was about to take place. Consisting of stone seats encircling a bonfire, the *dap-ay* fittingly serves as the site of telling the story which invokes the dual sense of *tokwifi*/star. Limmayug’s grandfather tells

the story of Falidfid, and how he witnessed the falling of a star from the sky, a star that turned out to be “a lady of fiery beauty” (Ocampo, 2019, 04:40-04:45). As the story was being told by the young Limmayug’s grandfather, the young adult Limmayug saw another “star” crashing down on earth, the “tokwif” who turned out to be Laura Blancaflor, trapped inside a TV set (see Figure 6).



Figure 6.
Laura, the tokwif.

Note: The star who fell from the sky (Valle, 2014, 04:58).

The formation around the *dap-ay* where the young gathered to listen to a story from the olden times (a story about a young man encountering a woman *tokwif* falling from the sky), the *chalikan* or cooking place near the *dap-ay*, and the blanket used to fend off the cold were all elements that circumscribed or figured in the short meeting of Limmayug and Laura. In the film’s design, these elements embodying indigenous life framed and paved the way for Laura and Limmayug’s encounter.

This encounter between man and woman, readily readable as romantic, can instead be interpreted as standing in for other historical encounters, most notably between indigenous people and the technology of television. Again, following Marx’s phrase about things pregnant with their contrary, *Tokwif* depicts the encounter in a more playful way, departing from the extremes where visual technologies including television either appalled and horrified the Igorot, or otherwise delighted and amazed them. The parallelism and blending between the old Bontok tale and the “contemporary” story between Limmayug and Laura prodded this playfulness, which in turn opened rifts ripe for meaning-making. There is no hint of the “backward” indigenous as the colonizers framed it; the *tokwif* Laura trapped in the TV felt saved by Limmayug, and was in fact thankful for it.

No longer a celestial star as in the indigenous tale, the *tokwif* Laura was an actress operating under the expectations of a script, of some television or film production (see Figure 7). This was her way of making sense of the incident, as she convinced herself that Limmayug was her new leading man



Figure 7.
A non-existent script.

Note: Laura thinks she's still supposed to act.... (Valle, 2014, 07:53-07:57).



Figure 8.
A non-existent script.

Note: ...and that Limmayug is her leading man (Valle, 2014, 08:04-08:07).



Figure 9.
A non-existent script.

Note: Laura still following the script (Valle, 2014, 09:07-09:11).

(see Figure 8). Yet, the attempt to make sense is partial at best as Laura stated that her “director never told me that there would be a sequence like this.” The attempt may be just partially successful, but Laura carried on, only to meet other deadlocks. She acted out what she recalled from the script and then called attention to a part where Limmayug was supposed to kiss her—*halikan siya* (see Figure 9). Here, the disjunct did not spell deadlock, but generated playfulness as Limmayug heard *chalikan*, stove in the indigenous language. When Laura readied herself to be kissed, Limmayug offered a pipe, betokening another confusion (see Figure 10).

Limmayug backpedaled after it appeared that he was about to leave Laura in the cold. He returned, put a blanket on her—the same thing he did to his storytelling grandfather when he was a child, the same thing he will do to the TV (Laura’s embodiment) towards the end when he grows old—and settled near the *chalikan* before being invited to join Laura and share the blanket with her (see figure 11). Morning arrived and Limmayug was seen carrying Laura, saying that he “wished for [her] to see my village” (Ocampo, 2019,14:51-14:54).

An astute and maybe unintended reversal occurred: it was not the inanimate TV that said to the indigenous people, or the colonized people in general, “Stop crying, little brown brothers, we only wish for you to see American products soon to be available in your grocery stores.” Rather, it was the indigenous man Limmayug who egged on Laura to do something, to look at what surrounded them, and in that way welcomed her to his community. Limmayug pointed at Kadchug, the community’s rice terraces, and Laura awoke, already “outside” the TV set, seeing plenitude not in consumer goods but in a feat of human engineering on the natural landscape that supported both human life and ecological interdependence (see Figure 12). It was not the TV or visual, colonial technologies in general horrifying the natives, threatening to suck out their souls, threatening to steal their lands and replace their ways of life with violent civilization. Instead, it was the natives welcoming the “outsider” to a community thriving even with the absence of Western modernization.

It was already daybreak, but it was foggy and still cold. There was no more *chalikan* nearby, so Laura, or the TV set, needed a blanket, which Limmayug provided and used to cover her/it.

Thus, the story that started in the *dap-ay*, near the *chalikan*, told by Limmayug’s grandfather who just received a blanket from his grandson, ended with an older Limmayug showing Laura the bountifulness that the indigenous community both received and worked hard for and cultivated. The TV here and the *tokwifi* it contained is not exactly the bearer of Western, “civilized” culture, an important tool in colonization. Instead, it was saved



Figure 10.
The pipe as chalikan.

*Note: The “kiss”
Limmayug offered
(Valle, 2014, 10:08-
10:11).*



Figure 11.
Before daybreak.

*Note: Laura and
Limmayug “sharing” a
blanket. (Valle, 2014,
13:30-13:45).*



Figure 12.
*The community’s
wealth.*

*Note: At daybreak,
Laura and Limmayug
(Valle, 2014, 16:12-
16:17).*

by the indigenous character, becoming a beneficiary of the indigenous value of caring for others, and not just other people at that, but everything else other than the self, including the land, the environment, and the entire community of species.

It is through these complex and detailed renditions that *Tokwif* make the indigenous visible. Not tokenistically as in including a singular Igorot character, or inserting vernacular dialogue, or having an indigenous setting, but in placing the indigenous in filmic situations where their worldviews, their manners of speaking, their decision-making, their bodily gestures, their values, among others, can be glimpsed. Together with *Walang Rape sa Bontok*, *Tokwif* shows the indigenous alive, active, and at work; as at home in their abodes, neither static in museums, nor hyper-circulated in social media. They figure in documentary films, making up and substantiating the meat of the content, providing and enriching their materials; or starring in a short film about stars, talking to a “fiery lady” in a TV set, almost kissing her, warmly welcoming her to the community, and ultimately clothing her in a blanket, whether she is really a lady, or a bulky TV set.

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Endnotes

¹ Quoting and critiquing books of conduct during Spanish colonization, Hernando shows how the same logic has been at work even before. From *Avisos saludables a las Doncellas*: “saan kaya caraniuang magmula ang pangangahas nang ualang pitagang lalaqui sa babayi? Aba! Sa babayi rin pala” (Hernando, 2016, p. 11). Further, Hernando cites Rodriguez-Tatel writing about “kasuotang malaritwal na isusuot ang apat na patong ng hiwa-hiwalay na piraso ng tela,” mula camisa hanggang “abot-tuhod na tapis” (p. 11). The responsibility is always on the woman (clothing herself, behaving “appropriately”), it is her body that is always controlled, and deviations are interpreted to lessen her personhood. Meanwhile, the friars are listing down infractions, like grade schoolers listing down the names of “noisy” classmates on the blackboard, and no one is minding, let alone rebuking, lecherous and sexually abusive men.

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