

On theAIDub Kalye Serye Phenomenon

A Roundtable Discussion

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Introduction

A phenomenal media event was the arrival of the Philippine love team of Alden Richards and Maine Mendoza (a. k. a. Yaya Dub) in the last quarter of 2015. The rise to popularity of “AIDub” was no less phenomenal for its being apparently unexpected and unpredictable, hence begging for explanation.

Richards, prior to his being “accidentally” paired with Mendoza, has been a minor celebrity in the major television network, GMA 7, for four years. In spite of playing supporting roles in a number of television dramas since 2011 and eventually starring as the National Hero, Jose Rizal, in the mini-series, *Ilustrado* (2014), Richards arguably did not enjoy the stature of a “star” until he took his place as one-half of AIDub. Mendoza, meanwhile, came to public attention in early 2015, when her series of Dubsmash videos, many of them parodying Philippine star, Kris Aquino, went viral and received nearly two million views in less than a week. In effect, Mendoza, through a smartphone application that allowed her to poke fun at mainstream stars, rose from being virtually unknown to being an Internet celebrity in a matter of days.

Both Richards and Mendoza joined the longest-running variety program, *Eat Bulaga!*, on GMA 7 in 2015, at a time when the noontime show was losing in the ratings game to *Showtime*, the variety program of its rival network, ABS-CBN 2. Richards hosted a segment of the show called *That’s My Bae*, a contest which was not unlike the talent contests he himself

had joined prior to his television career and not unlike the reality-TV talent show he co-hosted, *Bet ng Bayan*, on GMA 7 in 2014. Mendoza, on the other hand, was cast in the fictional role of Yaya Dub, a nanny to other *Eat Bulaga!* hosts. In her early appearances in the show, and in quite absurd comedic situations, she did not use her own voice but “spoke” by lipsynching songs and other popular soundbites in the manner of her viral videos. It must be noted that the appearance of this voiceless but Dubsmashing nanny, an unfamiliar face on mainstream television at the time but already an online celebrity, comes on the heels of some local media phenomena. There was poor Yaya Maya, who married her wealthy employer, Sir Chief, from the daytime drama, *Please Be Careful with My Heart*, which aired on ABS-CBN 2 for over two years, from 2012 to 2014. There was *Diary ng Panget*, a series of user-generated novels on Wattpad about a poor, ugly nanny to a rich, handsome guy that gained a wide readership, published in book format by Viva-PsiCom Publishing Inc. (2013), and adapted onscreen by Viva Films (2014), starring the then up-and-coming love team of James Reid and Nadine Lustre, popularly known as “JaDine.”

Appearing not as a love team at first, Richards and Mendoza interacted on *Eat Bulaga!* literally from different spaces (with Mendoza usually out in the field and Richards in the TV studio), their bodies and faces collocated, as it were, through a split-screen. Planned or unplanned, in one episode of the program, the two exhibited signs of mutual attraction, and, for one reason or another, this display of attraction clicked for the viewers. This initial and “accidental” flirting became the foundation for a plot of unrequited love, which was quickly turned into a full-blown story, narrated daily, from Mondays to Saturdays, on *Eat Bulaga!*

But this love story, typical though its plot was, turned out to be no mere segment in a television show; it became an accelerated media experiment. The segment itself took on a hybrid form, eventually turning into a soap opera called *kalye serye* within a song-and-dance program. The situations in the narrative appeared to be and was indeed partly improvised, as many Philippine sitcoms formally were. But social media played a crucial role in the “improvised” formation of the love team and the direction of their love story. Adoring fans took to the Internet to suggest or demand how the plot should proceed, and the show’s producers obviously took the cues. Little gestures in the show became memes, songs played during Dubsmashing scenes began to chart. The episodes were uploaded and became easily accessible online, allowing other media-users to follow the story and take part in its development. Thus, audience formations, such as the “team bahay,” “team abroad,” and “team replay” emerged, connoting the mode and time of viewing (e.g., in the afternoon on TV) and the location (e.g., at home

or overseas) of the viewer. Moreover, every week, a trending Twitter hashtag arose from hundreds and thousands of tweets that were responding to the story, making clear to everyone that AIDub was no longer just a noontime show segment, but now a popular cultural phenomenon watched or at least recognized by Filipinos all around the world.

A live concert-cum-soap opera—another hybrid form—was televised a few months after Richards and Mendoza’s initial flirting onscreen. The show was held at the Philippine Arena, outside of Metro Manila, and was attended by over 50,000 fans. The episode broke television ratings records in the Philippines and garnered responses on Twitter that numbered to more than 40 million tweets with the hashtag #AIDubEBTamangPanahon, a Guinness World Record.

Now what does this all mean?

Many fans, non-fans, and anti-fans have offered their interpretations on the phenomenon, and not a few debates have erupted between fans and bashers of AIDub. In the online news outlet, *Rappler*, for example, a number of columns on AIDub were published at the height of the love team’s popularity. In her article, writer Marguerite de Leon (2015) reads the heated discussions centered on AIDub that frequently ended up with vicious ad hominem attacks as signs of “Filipinos’ childish struggle with criticism” (para. 18). Sociologist Gerry Lanuza (2015) goes further and considers the devotion of the AIDub fandom as a form of implicit religion, with “its own sacred time, places, doctrines, myths of origin, rituals, altars, objects, body language (pabebe wave), and villains (Frankie Arinoli and Durizz) and saints (Alden and Yaya Dub)” (para. 7), and thus operating outside of rational arguments even as it expresses real and felt needs. Philosopher Leander Penaso Marquez (2015) detects in the AIDub phenomenon the “collective unconscious of Filipinos” (para. 8) while communication scholar Jason Cabañes (2015) finds in the form and content of the AIDub narrative a way to understand how Filipinos imagine intimacy. Popular culture scholar Soledad Reyes (2015), meanwhile, does not consider the AIDub phenomenon anything new but instead historicizes and contextualizes it as part of a long tradition that have been incarnated in various cultural forms, from theater to print to broadcast media.

What follows are papers that form part of a virtual roundtable discussion that inquire into the meaning and significance of the AIDub phenomenon, one year later. Ivery del Campo chronicles the beginnings of the *kalye serye* and evaluates the peculiar form that it has taken. In the process, she problematizes the interrelated concepts of authenticity, reality, fakeness, and artifice, and how these dialectically and formally flesh out the

particular complex of meaning that is AIDub. Kristoffer Brugada uses the AIDub phenomenon as an occasion to reflect on the kind of cultural politics involved in imagining the nation out of contrary and conflicting views. In particular, he takes cues from the work of Bienvenido Lumbera and Zeus Salazar and enjoins the reader to relate to the AIDub text and fandom not from an elitist perspective but from an empathizing one. Richard Bolisay looks beyond the television personas of AIDub and offers a critique of the films that Alden Richards and Maine Mendoza have starred in together since their phenomenal rise to stardom. By closely analyzing the difference between *My Bebe Love: #KiligPaMore* (2015) and *Imagine You & Me* (2016), Bolisay demonstrates the cultural dynamics at work not only in constructing AIDub as a media brand but also in producing and consuming the costlier form that is cinema.

References

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