

The Blessed Land and Asin's Prophetic Vision¹

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the music of the Filipino folk band Asin, and how both its body of work, as a performative gesture of liberating art, and its vision of a just society articulated in its lyrics contributed, and continues to contribute, to the movements of liberation of the Filipino people. Through their musical creation, they gave Filipinos a utopian view of what a just society can be and what its source of realization is. Their art provides the vision of a just world order to come, a form of *aporia* that challenges the members of this polity to reimagine the world of violence and marginalization that they protest.

Keywords: Filipino protest music, folk music, forms of *aporia*, ideology, music and liberation movements, utopian art.

In the late seventies through the decade of the eighties, the band Asin was a pervasive and influential presence in the Philippine musical landscape. Put together in 1977 for commercial purposes (it was given a recording contract mainly to make a female rendition of the song “Anak” by Freddie Aguilar) (Caruncho 1996, 232), the band enriched the musical vocabulary and imagination of generations of artists and musicians. Although it started out as a local version of American folk bands (by being a local version of Peter, Paul and Mary) (ibid., 234), Asin explored the possibilities of this genre using the Filipino language, indigenous musical instruments, and a poetic idiom that expressed local sentiments. The resulting music bore a distinctive style that influenced the making of what was then called Original Pilipino Music (OPM). However, the importance of Asin to Philippine culture is not only seen in the influence they had on the production of original Filipino music. As artists, they were able to articulate a philosophy of society that is deeply rooted in the Filipino ethos. One can even argue that theirs is a 20th century articulation of the social vision that had

its roots in the indigenous rationalities of the multiplicity called the Filipino people.

Here, the author will present a reading of the corpus of the band from 1978 to 2001 in order to articulate the band's vision of the good society—one that is their alternative to the Philippines at war with itself and oppressed by a dictatorship. By the band's singing and doing, they presented a vision of a world worth building and living for. Through their musical gestures and their lyrics, one can discern the evolution of a band that discovered important conceptions of a humane society embodied in their traditional cultures, which they used to critique the contemporary world and chart a path to human wholeness. Singer songwriters Cesar "Saro" Bañares Jr., Mike Pillora, and Lolita Carbon—later joined by Pendong Aban—were able to explore Filipino musical culture as well as its rituals and traditions to bring to fore a clearly articulated philosophy of social transformation. They were able to do this through a series of musical gestures that progressed with their growth as artists. The very evolution of their music, the progression of their albums, is itself an artistic act that, by its very doing, articulates and presences an insight. An analysis of the musical gesture of their journey together with an analysis of their lyrics can give a deeper articulation of their utopian vision of the possibilities of Philippine society. Understanding what they stand for can also offer an understanding of how artists can present by their way of being and their art a powerful reminder of the just society that is to come.

This work is primarily a philosophical work that explores the artistic gesture of this Filipino band. The sociological, anthropological, musicological, and literary material on the music of this period is scarce. In addition, the author is not equipped to engage in the kind of primary qualitative and quantitative work that would make for a proper sociological study. Neither does the author intend to engage in an extensive situating of their work in their social and historical milieu. Rather, the author's aim is to reflect on the vision of society the band articulates in their artistic statement through a close reading of its work and its development as a band. In this way, this study will explore how the artistic explorations of Asin provided a discourse that allowed Filipinos—who were under the burdens of a dictatorship and post-colonial exploitation in the form of "American imperialism"—to have a vision of who they were, why they were oppressed, and how they could realize a better world.

This analysis of postcolonial literature explains well what Asin did:

Elbaki Hermassi (1980,145–146) has identified two themes as central to the modern literature of the Third World that seem applicable to an analysis of popular music: the quest for affirmation of a clear national or subcultural/class identity, often conducted against the backdrop of foreign power; and the critique of the policies of the nation, usually reflecting a disenchantment and disillusionment with political failures to resolve the persisting socioeconomic problems. Most popular musics also derive from *déclassé* origins and consequently offer a proletarian appeal, allowing us to use them as a vehicle in studying 'history from the bottom up.' (Lockard 1996, 153)

Asin precisely provides a narrative of self, or an articulation of a mythic Filipino self, to assert against the economic, political, and cultural impositions of the United States in the Philippines as well as a critique and a response to the exploitation and oppression perpetrated by the Filipino elite which caused much of the suffering and dehumanization of the basic sectors of Philippine society. They accomplished this by exploring not so much the *déclassé* but more the marginalized traditions forgotten by the dominant, westernized culture.

Facing the reality of a neo-colonial presence of the US and the Marcos dictatorship, the band provided through song and gesture a clear articulation of the plight of the people as marginalized and provided a myth of the Filipino self around which to rally. Lewis notes this:

Social movements arise not only in response to conditions of inequality or injustice but, more important, because of changing definitions of these conditions. Those involved must recognize and define their plight as an injustice, and one that is intolerable to live with, rather than just passing it off as the result of luck or a cruel twist of fate. In addition, participants in such a movement must come to believe that an alleviation of these intolerable conditions is possible and that their efforts will be important in obtaining the desired changes in political and social conditions. (Lewis 1984, 39)

Through their music, the band provided a generation of Filipinos suffering under martial rule and neo-colonial exploitation, a frame of meaning with which to understand who they were and what they could do to realize their potential as a people. This they accomplished primarily as mediators between rationalities, i.e. they mediated between the more traditional rationalities of the margins and the more westernized dominant cultural, political, and economic elite in

order to show the contemporary Filipino the possibilities of liberation rooted in their indigenous selves.

The backdrop of Asin's work is the poverty of the margins in the Philippines. The greatest concentration of poverty in the nation of disparate islands and cultures tends to be located in the populations that are least westernized. These are the populations that are unable to engage the dominant, Western-defined economic, social and political systems. Thus, the greatest incidences of poverty and the greatest disparities in income tend to be concentrated in areas farthest from the National Capital Region (Virola, et al 2004), in places where the people of marginalized rationalities, or systems of conceptualizations and valuing, dwell. In our own research conducted for the Institute of Philippine Culture and for the World Bank, we discovered that the reason for the concentration of poverty in the poorest provinces [particularly Albay, Quezon and Agusan del Sur but more statistically the provinces of Lanao del Sur (68.9 percent poverty incidence), Apayao (59.8 percent), Eastern Samar (59.4 percent), Maguindanao (57.8 percent) and Zamboanga del Norte (50.3 percent)] was rooted in the marginalization of their rationalities (Olchondra 2013). These are the areas where people are mainly unable to understand English except at a basic level, have no understanding of government processes and how to effectively access government resources except through intermediaries, and have no effective capacity to engage the dominant economic system especially for them to be able to earn a steady income. This is precisely because they are the people whose rationalities are other than the imposed dominant system that defines and determines development, justice, and human flourishing.

Since Spanish colonization, marginalized sectors have been those that are not able to effectively or fruitfully engage a system based on the dominant, westernized rationality. The indigenous peoples and other people who belong to traditional communities that have not taken on the aspirations and lifeways of Western development have always been considered the poorest communities. Many of them are deprived of the means with which to realize a dignified human life because of alienation from their ancestral lands, and the resources once available to them were conscripted to be the cheap resources of new systems of production and wealth creation. During the Marcos period, the might of the military and paramilitary forces, as well as repressive laws and government systems, were applied to force the marginalized basic sectors to suffer the conditions the regime was imposing – such as low wages, displacement, and land appropriation to further the interests of its cronies and multinational corporations

that invested heavily in extracting resources from the country (Francia 2010, 239–47).

In this world of exploitation and marginalization, Asin played a particular role as the mediator between the marginalized sectors and the part of the mainstream Philippine society that was disenchanting with the prevailing social and political system and sought for an alternative. This audience sought for a conception of Philippine society that would give them a coherent and meaningful alternative to exploitation and oppression. We can say that the band fulfilled the role of protest musicians in a mass movement:

Music and popular songs can play an important role in this process of symbolic redefinition and the creation of a social ideology for social movements. As Finlay has noted, if one examines just the lyrics of protest songs associated with social movements, one can find many examples of diagnoses of what is wrong with the present order of things, proposed solutions to these wrongs, and rationales for participation in the movement—all key elements in the definition of a social movement ideology. (Lewis 1984, 39)

In order to take part in building this social movement ideology (or more properly, the movement's utopian vision), the band had to delve deep into the myths of self and the good society envisioned by and contained in the traditions and sentiments of the marginalized sectors. Thus, they helped the social movements that sought to reform the dominant system envision the meaning of their movements. By exploring the values, social vision, conception of self, and musical expressions of the marginalized basic sectors, they were able to articulate the meaning and direction of social change in the Philippines. Their musical journey provided the nation, in this time of unrest, the utopian vision of an ideal society to strive for and a path toward it. More precisely, Asin provided a utopian vision of society—one that speaks to a people's system of valuation (what Scheler calls the *ordo amoris*) and their creative imagination. The utopian vision awakens the people's will to act for the realization of the good. It is the vision from "nowhere" that presents a truer conception of the good that we can achieve yet challenges us to strive toward the good (Ricoeur 1986). In contrast to an ideology that provides a conceptual framework justifying the lived world of production and the structures of daily life, utopias paint a picture of possible worlds that appeal to the heart's conception of what ought to be. The utopian vision presented in a work of art is a concretization, by way of an artistic representation, of the ethos of a possible collective self. Often this is concretized in a picture of an ideal society and community reflecting the values that the collective self of a constructed or organic community responds to as its possibility.

Asin, in its corpus, defines this utopian destination and maps a way to its realization. With their words, music and performance, they drew a map to an impossible democracy that is to come.

The Musical Journey

In the decades of the band's prominence, there was a revolution in Philippine music that was emerging. Ironically, this emerging revolution owed much to it benefactors, Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos. When Ferdinand Marcos declared the founding of his New Society, it was clear to him that this could be most effectively achieved if the value system of the new citizen of the New Society was formed according to his vision. One very effective means to form the heart of the citizen would be through the arts. The arts would shape the sentiments and values of the people so that they bear a shared conception of society that they must build together.

Ferdinand Marcos believed that the people must achieve a genuine appreciation of their culture in order to liberate themselves from the colonial yoke. Toward this end, the government sponsored the study of the Filipino culture and the training of artists through the Cultural Center of the Philippines, the UP Conservatory, and the Makiling Arts Center, giving support to architects, composers, musicians, translators, and artists of all sorts. And because of this conscious rediscovery of the indigenous, a consciously Filipino music emerged. Composers at the forefront of this movement were very conscious of creating a musical idiom that is based on the indigenous tradition that would "uplift the Filipino from her colonial past" (Navarro 2014, 91). In his study of music in the New Society, Navarro observes this:

Local composers became active in creating a music that gave weight to the Filipino character of the New Society. Using endemic cultural instruments—the folk song, indigenous instruments, epics, history, novels, etc.—the musicians sought as much as they could to create the New Society by giving it its proper due. (ibid., xx)

This new breed of state-sponsored musicians created a new music that incorporated all forms of indigenous artistic and cultural creations. Of course, the objective was to create new citizens for the New Society; however, because of the promotion of this kind of musical creation, it also fed the creative imaginary of the non-state-sponsored, and perhaps adversarial, artists.

Marcos also allowed for the development of the local music industry by imposing policies like Resolution No.75-31 of the Broadcast Media Council which stated that at least one original Filipino song

should be played in the radios at every hour (ibid., xvii). This way, groups like Asin and Apo Hiking Society would be known. Without such a policy, local artists would have had a difficult time gaining airtime. Through moves that were aimed at building a citizenry for the New Society, Marcos created the ethos and infrastructure for artists for liberation to find a vocabulary and imaginary for protest. It made possible the emergence of a generation of composers who valued the Filipino culture and tradition and mined it for a vision of a better world that would resonate in the hearts of their people. Through this new idiom for popular music creation, their songs let emerge and gave voice to feelings that recognized the abuses of the regime and allowed them to crystalize their condemnation of the corruption and violence of the Marcos government (Navarro 2014, xx-xxi) Not only that, these new songs became a vehicle for the expression of sectoral concerns, the exposing of abuses, and the sharing of suppressed news (ibid., Ch.6). The irony is that in its encouragement for the Filipino artist to build a body of work to support the New Society, it created an art form that would contribute to the people's resistance to Marcos.

Asin was part of a movement of Filipino artists who sought to find a musical expression that was closer to the Filipino experience and more original than the popular songs that cloned American pop, and presented an alternative to the propaganda of the government. The artists experimented with Tagalog or Filipino in the writing of lyrics (Lockard 1996, 164) and with the exploration of the experiences of the youth, of persons in situations of conflict, and the marginalized. Pinoy rock (slang for local Filipino rock) was the early fruit of this, and it was revolutionary because it sought to explore themes that went beyond the escapist popular music prevalent at the time. This led to the exploration of the experiences of oppression in the successful works from this period:

Some nationalists perceive pinoy as an art form explicitly challenging neocolonialism by catering to a wide audience, cutting across classes, and mirroring the experience of underdevelopment. It needs to be emphasized that the term pinoy is an imprecise but convenient label for a procession of popular styles that developed, linked mainly by their use of Filipino, with varying degrees of Filipino content and sensibilities; the sound ranged from rock to folk, pop to jazz. (ibid., 164)

Asin's musical journey begins exactly as an exploration of Filipino themes using the Filipino language expressed in a folk-rock idiom with flourishes from ethnic or traditional instruments and styles. But as they developed their talents and grew in their artistry, they found more ways to express the idea of what it means to be a Filipino

and how to achieve the promise of a better community through this exploration of the Filipino self.

In their corpus, we can see how the very act of musical exploration is itself an expressive performance that shared their discovered country or their mythic Filipino utopia. This discography embodies a musical journey that allowed the band to make its artistic testament and to discover its culture's deepest insight into the world they were building. First, in *Asin* (Salt, 1977) and *Himig ng Pag-ibig* (*Song of Love*, 1979), they began with an exploration of Filipino social realities with regard to environmental degradation, the unrest of the youth, the wars in the countryside, social injustice, and the loss of self. In their songs, one can already hear the use of ethnic instruments (mainly from the marginalized ethnic and Muslim groups) and the musical forms or folk songs of the more integrated, but still traditional, cultures (what is referred to by indigenous peoples as the lowland cultures). They continue to explore these literary and musical themes in *Himig ng Lahi* (*Music of Our Race*, 1983) and *Sa Atubiling Pahanon* (*In a Doubtful Time*, 1986), but here the integration of the rhythms and voices of the marginalized and exploited is very pronounced—from album cover art (indigenous peoples' aesthetics) to the actual framing of the song form by indigenous rhythms.

Finally, they produced a series of albums that offered their own versions of songs from various genres of traditional Filipino music. At first, this series began as a subtle protest against the dictatorship in *Mga Awitin ng Bayan Kong Pilipinas* (*Songs of My Land the Philippines*, 1985). The very title evokes the love of motherland, which was the main motivation for the revolution against Spain and war against the United States of America. It is a sentiment that continues to fuel the revolutionary spirit of communist and socialist revolutionaries and military adventurists. By reviving nationalistic songs embraced as anthems by the protest movements of the 1970s, they are able to subtly protest against the dictatorship while minimizing the possibility of being branded as subversives. But as their project of discovery continued in *Himig Kayumanggi* (*Music of the Brown People*, 1987) and *Sinta* (*Beloved*, 1988), they discover local idioms by which to assert a Filipino identity and Filipino sentiments thereby completing their journey of discovery. Their final reunion album, *Pag-ibig, Pagbabago, Pagpapatuloy* (*Love, Change, Continuation*, 2001), is a mature reassertion and punctuation of their call for the Filipino people to realize their potential.

The band's development is a performative gesture that dramatizes the journey of self-discovery of a Filipino who belongs to the dominant, westernized rationality. S/he begins as a Western-educated person

whose ideal self is a Filipino version of an American type. Thus, Asin begins as a local version of the typical western social issue oriented folk band. From their explorations of Philippine social realities such as the insurgency, the exploitation of labor, and disenchantment with Western culture, they begin to discover their cultural roots from the lowland communities, an exploration that eventually leads to their discovery of the more marginalized, indigenous cultures that are the other of mainstream Filipino society. More particularly, they are led to celebrate the cultures of the Muslim and various indigenous peoples of Mindanao. And as they end their career, they experiment with presenting local songs in various styles that allow the indigenous to dialogue with the West and prove itself equal to it. The musical journey is one of self-discovery and the assertion of the native in the dominant culture. In this gesture, they recover a lost self and give the contemporary Filipino a direction for coming to wholeness. Thus, we can say that Asin's own musical journey is an iconic journey for self-discovery. Following a folk-tale logic, where the protagonists are caught in a world of enchanted forgetfulness, the group begins by articulating their feeling of being lost from themselves, discovers that this malaise is rooted in the world around them and, because of their journey, finds a way to rediscover their truth and see the possibilities of wholeness. This insight will be further illustrated in an analysis of their own lyrics.

The Malaise of The Lost Self

The context of Asin's creativity was the Marcos dictatorship and American neo-colonial exploitation of Philippine resources and labor. It was a period when the strongman president, Ferdinand Marcos, maintained his twenty-year rule by suppressing press freedom, controlling the labor unions, and overpowering rural unrest through the militarization of the countryside with soldiers, paramilitary groups and cults terrorizing peasants suspected of siding with the communist and Muslim insurgents. It was a time of indiscriminate killings (2,255 between 1973 and 1985) and arrests (6,000 arrests only four years after the declaration of martial law in 1972) (Francia 2010, 239). The government was fighting wars on two fronts, versus the Communist Party of the Philippines and the Moro National Liberation Front—the ranks of which were swelling because of the regime's human rights abuses and the worsening poverty situation (Francia 246–47). The basic sectors, i.e. the farmers, the indigenous peoples, the peasants, and the workers, all suffered from a drop of income (20 to 40 percent by the end of the 1970s) and income disparities rose with the top 10 percent earning 42 percent of the total income of the nation and the

lowest 40 percent earning 9 percent of the income generated by the country by 1981 (ibid., 241). It was a time then that the basic sectors were easily organized by ideological groups and non-aligned civil society groups to resist tyranny and human rights violations. It was a dangerous time when all citizens faced arbitrary arrests, torture and execution and even the effects of a protracted war—not to mention poverty and the lack of development. The band's social realist art focused on articulating the social ills faced by the nation.

The earliest songs of Asin were articulations of the unrest born of these times. One of their earliest and enduring hits, *Itanong Mo sa Mga Bata* (Ask the Children, 1978), speaks of the fundamental condition of the person in this society as forlornness (*nag-iisa*) and confusion (*naguguluhan ang isip*) because there is no clear meaning to one's life, and society is in a state of disorder. The song *Magulang* (Parents, 1993), which expresses the anguish of the youth, speaks of their being in a state of internal disorder (*gulong-gulo*) and thus, they are helpless or powerless in realizing their human flourishing. In this state, the persona cannot see what must be seen and cannot do what must be done. This is clear in the song *Gising na, Kaibigan* (Awaken, Friend, 1978):

<i>May taong bulag</i>	There are persons who are blind
<i>kahit dilat ang mata.</i>	though their eyes are open.
<i>May mga taong tinatalian sariling</i>	There are persons who bind their
<i>kamay at paa.</i>	own hands and feet.
<i>Problema'y tinatalikdan</i>	They turn their back on their problems.
<i>Salamin sa mata'y hindi makita.</i>	They don't see the glass that colors
	their vision.

Here we see the idea of one's being blind to the root of one's helplessness and confusion. One's lack of self-awareness hinders one's capacity to realize her possibilities, and thus one cannot find one's way to fullness and possibility. In *Pagbabalik* (Homecoming, 1978), they sing:

<i>Sa gitna ng dilim</i>	In the middle of the night,
<i>Ako ay nakatanaw</i>	I caught a glimpse
<i>Ng ilaw na kay panglaw</i>	Of a light so dim
<i>Halos di ko makita.</i>	I could hardly see it.
<i>Tulongan mo ako. Ituro ang daan.</i>	Help me and show me the path.
<i>Sapagkat ako'y sabik</i>	Because I desire to find
<i>sa aking pinagmulan.</i>	my way home.

The song speaks of a person who is lost and cannot find any rest or wholeness. Wholeness can only be achieved by one who can find one's way home. The desire to find one's way back home is rooted in this helplessness and confusion that are ignored and yet effectively render

the speaker inutile. The implication is that if the speaker is in a state of malaise that causes powerlessness, she must find her way back home to regain her human capability.

Asin has a clear faith that life has a meaning and order, and that people have a place in the cosmos. The capable person is one whose eyes are open to the presencing of meaning in the cosmos and is able to live a creative human existence in response to this order. It is very clear to the singers that the confusion and the sense of being inutile are rooted in the Filipino's breaking away from the order of nature. This is articulated in the song, *Tuldok* (Speck, 1978), which speaks of the importance of finding one's place in the cosmos. People are but mere specks in the world. We like to think that it are the centers that define its workings. But the cosmos has its own rhythm and meaning and it is incumbent upon people to find themselves upon it:

<i>Kaya wala kang dapat na</i>	And so you have no right
<i>ipagnayabang</i>	to boast
<i>Na ikaw ay mautak</i>	That you are smart and
<i>at maraning alam</i>	have much knowledge
<i>Dahil kung susuriin at ating iisipin</i>	Because if you reflect and think about it
<i>Katulad ng lahat ikaw ay tuldok rin.</i>	Like all things, you are but a speck.

If one awakens to the truth of one's position in the universe and realizes that this cosmos has an order and a fullness of its own, one will awaken from the paralysis of confusion and will find one's creative participation in reality.

Thus, we now understand the need to return to one's roots. It is the way to understand this order and recognize one's actual significance. In returning to her traditions, she learns to listen to or discover her truth. In many of their songs, the idea of the *silangan* (the East where the Sun rises and also the place from which one is born) and one's homeland (*pinagmulan*) are the sources of enlightenment for the weary and confused. The awakening of the helpless one is hinged on this return to her roots. In *Dasal at Katutubong Musika* (Prayer and Indigenous Music, 1979), they speak of how indigenous music brings with it the wealth of our spirit (*yaman ng ating kaluluwa*) and from it the contemporary person can inherit feelings and spirits that are beautiful (*damdamin at diwang kay ganda*). In the native culture the Filipino will find the wisdom and values of her ancestors. And if she connects with this culture, she will gain their wisdom and find her power and direction. And yet the contemporary native does not recognize this (*Bakit di napapansin*).

Asin's music is a call for a return. They believe that the contemporary person has lost an important part of herself by forgetting her heritage. Heritage is symbolized by the idea of the land

of birth or home (*lupang kinagisnan*) and traditions of youth (*kaugalian ng kamusmusan*). In many songs, they express the desire to return to this state or place as an act of finding one's self. Thus, the song *Ludima* (1980) is a call to return to one's source, a return that demands an examination of one's self and a cultivation of one's traditional knowledge:

<i>Nasaan na ang sikat ng araw</i>	Where is the rising sun's light
<i>Sa lupa kong mayaman?</i>	In my rich land?
<i>Nasaan na ang dati kong bayan</i>	Where is my former land?
<i>Di ko na yata alam?</i>	That I may not know anymore.
<i>Bawat hampas ng alon</i>	With every crash of the wave
<i>sa aplaya</i>	on the beach
<i>Buhangin may nasasala.</i>	Some sand is sifted
<i>Tulad ng kaugalian noong musmus pa</i>	Just like the ways of one's childhood
<i>Di ko maipamana.</i>	I cannot pass on.
<i>Sanhi ba ng kamangmangan</i>	Was it because of my ignorance
<i>Lupa kong nilisan?</i>	That I left my land?
<i>Dapat bang mawalan</i>	Must we be deprived
<i>Dahil sa kahirapan?</i>	Because of hardship?
<i>Lalakbayin ang landas na</i>	I will traverse the
<i>walang-hanggan</i>	endless road
<i>Sa alon ng kamulatan.</i>	In the crest of awakening
<i>Upang muling mabalitan Lahi</i>	So that I may return to
<i>kong niyurakan.</i>	The race I abandoned.
<i>Dapat bang pakinggan</i>	Should we not listen
<i>Tinig ng kasaysayan?</i>	To the voice of history?
<i>Dapat bang ipaglaban</i>	Must we fight for
<i>lupang kinagisnan?</i>	the land of our birth?

Clearly, the return to tradition is a necessity for finding one's humanity. It is the only way to transcend the internal disorder.

The fruit of this return is articulated in the song *Tala* (Star, 1993). Here, the band describes the person who is made whole because of her relationship with the world and her fellow persons:

<i>Ang silahis ng araw sa silangan</i>	The rising of the sun in the East
<i>At ang liwanag ng buwan</i>	and the light of the moon
<i>sa kurimlan</i>	in the dark
<i>Ang sinag na ibinigay sa kalawakan</i>	The glow that it gives in space
<i>Ang ating makikita</i>	We will see
<i>sa kanyang katauhan</i>	in her person.
<i>Siya ang magiging tala</i>	She will be the guiding star
<i>ng kinabukasan</i>	of the future
<i>Magbibigay ilaw sa ating daan</i>	She will brighten the road

<i>Siya ang bunga ng ating</i>	She is the fruit
<i>pagmamahal</i>	of our love
<i>Tulad ng walang hanggang</i>	Like our eternal union.
<i>samahan.</i>	

Clearly, they are speaking here of their future child, but the portrait draws the image of the whole person. The whole person will be a source of light or enlightenment. She will be the light or hope of the future. Because the person has found herself to be made whole by rooting herself in tradition and understanding her place in the cosmos, she will be a light for others to find their own truth. Her own presencing as a whole person is one that enlightens and enlivens others. She is a presence that helps others transcend their own confusion and with that find their own potential as persons. Thus, the whole person is not whole only for her own flourishing but also the flourishing of others. In their vision of human fullness, Asin calls us to root ourselves in the wisdom of tradition so that we can guide the light for others. We see that self-discovery and realization is also a responsibility for the other and the community that is in conflict and in disturbance. The peace of the nation—the realization of the *lupang pinangako* (promised land) or *pinagpalang lupa* (blessed land), which is Asin's utopia—is rooted in the individual's realization of herself.

The Blessed Land

In the songs of the band, there is a persistent desire to return to or establish the blessed land. This is clear in two lasting works: *Balita* (News, 1979) and *Payo* (Advice, 1993). In *Balita*, they picture a land that was promised with these characteristics: The fields are gold (*ang bukid ay ginto*), the birds are free as people (*ang ibon ay sinlaya ng tao*), and silence is the innocent child's lullaby (*katahimikan ang musikang nagpapatulog sa batang walang muang sa mundo*). This is fleshed out further in *Payo* where a grandparent is teaching a child to open her eyes to the world and to respect it:

<i>Ang buhay kung tignan, mahiwaga.</i>	Life, if you look at it, is wondrous.
<i>Pati na rin ang oras</i>	Even time is something
<i>di makuha.</i>	we cannot grasp
<i>At ang umpisa ay tapaos na.</i>	And the beginning is accomplished.
<i>Lipad nang lipad ang ibong kay ganda</i>	The beautiful bird flies forever free.
<i>Bulaklak na makulay sa mata</i>	Flowers bring color to the eyes.
<i>Dingding ang himig</i>	Listen to the sound of the
<i>ng hangang malamyos</i>	gentle wind.
<i>Tignan ang lupa sagana</i>	Gaze at the land that is rich
<i>sa ating pagod.</i>	with our toil.

This describes the peaceful land, which is the source of wholeness for the person. It is the source of inner peace and wisdom that brings a person to a kind of centeredness from dwelling in a land that receives creative human labor.

We can see this in *Ang Mahalaga* (What Matters Most, 2009): Peace, not just silence/Inner certainty, not just calm/Every morning brings hope (*Payapa, di lang tahimik / Panatag, di lang kalmante / Bawat umaga may pag-asa*). One achieves this state of dwelling in the promised land when the most fundamental needs of persons are met—food when one is hungry; land to till and cultivate our dreams (*May lupa na mabubungkal / At pagtatamnan ng mga pangarap*); a home not just a house and a family that stays whole in hardship and contentment (*Tahanan, hindi lang bahay / Pamilya na nagkakaisa / Magkakasama sa hirap at ginhawa*). This is a state that can be achieved by a whole and faithful heart:

*Tunay na pagmamahal,
Taos na pagbibigay,
Di naghihintay ng balik,
Iisa ang salita,
Tapat sa pangako,
Ito ang mahalaga,
Ito ang tototo.*

Genuine love,
Absolute giving,
That doesn't expect return,
Being true to one's word,
Faithful to one's promise,
This is what matters
This is the truth.

These are the important characteristics of persons that are repeated as the chorus of the song. And the repetition of these characteristics as necessary and true indicates that the promised land is established and achieved when persons are faithful and true, responsible and loving. In other words, the good person as understood by traditional Filipino culture, will be able to build or restore this world.

This becomes clearer when we know why the world is in a state of violence and confusion. In *Balita* and *Bayan Kong Sinilangan* (Land of My Birth, 1978), the source of strife is explored. The songs describe the state of war that existed in Mindanao, which destroys the promised land. The state of war is the fruit of the anger that rises as a response to the greed and a lack of responsibility of those who dwell in the land of our birth. We are one people but we are not persons who take responsibility for each other. In *Sa Atubiling Panahon*, the loss of land of the indigenous peoples and the consequent inability to live according to one's culture results in a cry from the heart. This also leads to a fire in the heart, the fire from the North (or perhaps the northern parts where the indigenous peoples of Luzon are located) which demands that blood and sweat will be the price paid for peace. There is a clear anger in the heart ready to burst expressed in *Ang*

Sigaw ng Puso ni Awid (The Scream of Awid's Heart, 1980). This is the cry of the indigenous person whose land is taken away from her:

<i>Sa tribong tahimik</i>	In the peaceful tribe
<i>May pusong galit</i>	There is an angry heart
<i>Nakayapak ang paa</i>	Feet firmly planted
<i>Sa angking bukid.</i>	In its own field.
<i>Sa loob ng gubat</i>	In the jungle
<i>Ay may nagtatanong</i>	Someone is asking
<i>Ano ang isisigaw ng puso ni Awid?</i>	What will be the cry of Awid's heart?

Here we are confronted with the frustration and confusion, anger and the need to address the injustice. The song is an indictment against the evil in the hearts of men that drives others to a profound, existential anguish. The question then is, will this be addressed by war?

In *Lagablal sa Katimugan* (Flames from the South, 1980), we are given an answer. If the violence is born from the disordered heart of the persons, the answer too comes from the heart of the person. In their words, we must wet with tears the fire in the heart (*patakan ng luha ang apoy sa puso*). The answer is the goodness of self, compassion, and responsibility for the other. If, as in *Ang Bayan Kong Sinilangan*, the strife is the fruit of inner turmoil—*kasing gulo ng tao, kasing gulo ng mundo* (as discordant as humans, as discordant as the world) and *di malaman kung saan nanggaling, di alam kung saan patungo* (we cannot say where it came from, and we cannot say where it is leading)—only genuine communion of persons will restore the promised land.

Salt of the Promised Land

Limot na Bayani (Forgotten Hero, 1979) defines who the salt of the earth (*asin ng lupang pinagpala*) are. The teacher, farmer, and worker are heroes because every drop of their sweat is important for our lives (*Barwat patak ng pawis nila, Sa buhay natin ay mahalaga*). They genuinely serve society. Their work is an act of generosity, and this generosity enriches and participates in the work of the Creator. A person becomes the salt of the earth with sacrifice and hard work. Hard work is a giving of self to the task and to serving the other, and self-giving work is an act that actualizes the promised land.

In *Kahapon at Pag-ibig* (History and Love, 1979), Asin talks about the possibility that realizing love can cause transformation because it presences goodness. Love is like a force that can bring a good society to life and the generations that will build it. By love's presence, the world can be made good:

<i>Buhay mo ay ingatan mo</i>	Take care of your life
<i>Pagkat yan ang yaman mo</i>	Because that is your treasure Your love
<i>Ang pag-ibig mo sa kapwa</i>	for your neighbor
<i>Ay tutularan ng bagong silang.</i>	Will be a model for the newborn.
<i>Darating ang panahon</i>	A time will come
<i>Ang kabutihan mo ay maiiwan</i>	Your goodness will remain
<i>Sa lupang ito na pinagpala</i>	In the blessed land
<i>Sa nilikhang iba't ibang anyo.</i>	In nature's rich forms.

Here we see that the love we pass to the next generations will be the force that remains to transform society. That is why they ask that we use our hearts in *Bayan Kong Similangan*:

<i>Kung ang kalaban ay walang puso</i>	If your enemy has no heart
<i>Puso na rin ang gamitin mo.</i>	Then use your heart.
<i>Ituring mong kaibigan</i>	Treat him as a friend
<i>Isipin mong siya'y may puso rin</i>	Treat him as if he had a heart
<i>katulad mo.</i>	like you do.

Because of the use of one's heart, one can see the value of the other—even the enemy. Social transformation begins with the opening of the heart to the other. In *Bato-bato sa Langit* (Stone Thrown to the Sky, 1993)—which is a string of tongue in cheek advice—there is this statement of faith: Love and dreams are eternal (*Pag-ibig at panaginip iya'y walang hanggan*). Love is an endless transformative force.

This love is the light that filled the inner self of the Filipino's ancestors, which continues to be inherited by the new generation, and is the Filipino's power to realize the best world. This inheritance is the source of their power to transform the world. The open heart will make love to be present and will allow love to transform reality.

When the band reunited, the main song of its album *Pag-ibig, Pagmamahal, Pagbabalik* (Love, Loving, Return, 2009) profoundly illustrates the effect of love:

<i>Kailan papayapa dito sa daigdig?</i>	When is there peace in this world?
<i>Kailan mababalik ang bansang tahimik?</i>	When will we restore the peaceful land?
<i>Kailan mawawala ang lahat ng ganid?</i>	When will all discord end?
<i>'Di bat 'pag mayroong pag-ibig?</i>	Won't it come when there is love?
<i>Kailan matatapos ang sapalaran?</i>	When will strife end?
<i>Kailan mararating ang kalangitan?</i>	When will we reach heaven?
<i>Kailan mararanasan ang walang hanggan?</i>	When will we experience the eternal?
<i>Kapag may tunay na pagmamahal.</i>	When there is genuine love.

<i>Ito'y biyaya ng Diyos na Maykapal</i>	This is a gift of God the Creator
<i>Pag-ibig, pag-ibig pagmamahal</i>	Love, loving, giving love
<i>Ito ang tunay na maiaalay.</i>	This is the genuine gift we can offer.

Love is a gift that is from the creator and it bears this capacity for transformation. It is restorative and it brings wholeness. And the reason that it has this power is because it is a transcendent and eternal power that good people will channel into the broken world of strife. The problem is that people have forgotten how to presence love. However, the traditions of presencing love can be found in traditions that have structured the Filipino self. Thus, in *Anak ng Sultan* (Child of the Sultan, 1978), they talk about how the struggles of a confused child trapped in social unrest can find peace in her traditions.

<i>Kailan ba masasagot ang lahat</i>	When will there be answers
<i>Ng aking mga katanungan</i>	To all my questions
<i>Lahat ng kasaguta'y nasa iyong pinanggalingan</i>	All the answers are from whence you came.
<i>Magtiis ka muna kaibigan</i>	Suffer patiently, friend.
<i>May ilaw sa kabila ng kadiitman</i>	There is light on the other side of darkness
<i>Dagat man daw kay lalim may hangganan</i>	Even the deep ocean they say has a limit
<i>Umasa kang maririnig</i>	Have hope that your cry of peace
<i>Ang sigaw mong kapayapaan</i>	Will be heard.

Before the death of original band member Saro Bañares, he was able to record a final song that the surviving members of the band built on. He paints this picture in *Sa Malayong Silangan* (In the Distant East, 2009):

<i>Iguhit mo ako ng isang magandang pook</i>	Draw me a picture of a beautiful place
<i>Ng simbahang nakatayo, sa ibabaw ng bato</i>	Of a church on a rock
<i>At aking ipapakita ang kahoy na may pugad</i>	And I will show you a woods with a nest
<i>Na duyan ng hangin sa ibabaw ng ulap</i>	That is the hammock of the wind on a cloud.
<i>Sa paglubog ng araw, biyuletag hapon</i>	At dusk, there is a violet time
<i>Sa kintab ng dahon, bituin sa itaas</i>	In the sparkle of the leaf, a star above
<i>At sa iyong paligid, sa animo ng siga</i>	And all around you, by the shadow of the warming fire
<i>Mga matang nagmamasid hindi mo makita.</i>	There are eyes watching you that you cannot see.

This is again a picture of the world at peace. A pastoral picture of peace as dusk is the world that they seek – a return to a simplicity that will cradle our human flourishing. Clearly, there is a pastoral romanticism expressed here. Against the violence and the destruction of the intrusion of Western development, there is this expressed desire to return to one's romanticized past. However, it is also an assertion of the necessity of revisiting and reasserting the value of a traditional rationality as an alternative or a partner in dialogue with the dominant system of violence and greed.

A Democracy to Come

The value of artists like Asin is that they articulate a utopian vision for a broken people's possibilities. Derrida in many works speaks of the forms of aporia. A form of aporia is the presencing of the possibility of the impossible. It is the presencing of what human beings experience as an imperative that is unrealizable and yet challenges us to realize it. For instance, in the idea of the democracy that is to come, he speaks of the impossible promises of democracy such as the protection of our rights and freedoms (Derrida 1994, 65–6; 2005, 8–9). But given how democracies are a balance of interests and conceptions of the good, how they bear a play of power, and how state coercion and violence in their many forms are necessary in maintaining these rights, no democracy is a true democracy. To realize democracy in the finite world, one must curtail freedoms and some rights must be violated. This is the aporia of democracy—it calls on us to desire and strive for the establishment of a state of equal persons who are all individual lawmakers and who will be treated as ends. But the paradox of democracy is that the protection of rights and freedoms necessitates the curtailment and possible violation of these rights and freedoms. However, we cannot give up the promise of democracy because it is the political structure that promises to serve all persons in an ordered community – especially a mass and multi-rational community. And more importantly, we understand the aporia to be rooted in the fundamental condition of the human person. We are all in a state of finitude that is confronted by the forms of aporia—the democracy to come, the gift, hospitality, and forgiveness. We are all called to the true forms of this transcendent fullness and yet we ourselves are incapable of even comprehending it. Still, in aporia, we strive for the democracy that is to come, because it calls on us to act as if we could establish it.

The recognition of and response to the call for the aporia of good society is necessary for human flourishing. It is the root of our capacity to hope. However, to be caught in the mundane world that is forgetful of aporias is to be caught in a world of despair—special-

ly when dark times prevail. Artists like Asin through their performative gestures and their articulations in song keep the aporia alive and present to Filipinos in these dark times. Through a journey of return that leads to a discovery of the wisdom of tradition, Asin reminds the contemporary Filipino who is mired in violence and exploitation that there is a just world to come. It is a promise that relies on an impossible hope that good persons can heal a broken world. But if one is to believe the promise of love as a force of transformation, as articulated by prophets in other dark times, then the reminder of this promise is necessary – a role a society's utopian artists are to fulfill.

NOTES

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