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Modernizing Frontier

Chemical Transformations Young
People's Minds and Bodies
in Puerto Princesa

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Introduction: Youth and Chemicals in a Modernizing Frontier

Anita P. Hardon and Michael L. Tan

Palawan is a land of promise, and of paradox.

On maps, it appears on the edge of the Philippines, isolated. Indeed, it is a kind of last frontier. Its population remained tiny for centuries, the government offering homestead land in the 1950s practically for free to attract migrants from outside. The Palawan State University was established by law in 1965, but did not become operational until 1972. A commercial airport did not exist until the 1980s, and for many years, flights were limited.

Yet Palawan is one of the oldest sites of human habitation in the Philippines with the famous Tabon Cave human fossils. The oldest bone fragment here has been dated to be about 47,000 years. We know, too, that trade with China goes back several centuries.

Today, Palawan seems to be making up for lost time with new commercial investments pouring in at breakneck speed. In particular, outsiders have rediscovered its potentials around logging, mining, fisheries, and tourism.

This has caused concern among individuals and civil society organizations who want sustainable development, and see the commercial developments mainly as extractive, not just of natural resources but of the human. There's very cheap labor available. And when potential investors marvel about cheap land, they're actually talking about displacing earlier settlers, including indigenous people, from their lands.

A subtle but still insidious aspect of the exploitation of human resources is a transformation of the very concept of human development. Using the rhetoric of modernity, residents in Palawan are reorienting the way they view themselves as well as their families and friends. The value of a human being now hinges on how they look, and the desired appearance is defined from the outside, as we see in this anthology of research reports coming from the Chemical Youth project of the University of Amsterdam and the University of the Philippines Diliman.

We read about the importance of fair skin as a projection of cleanliness, of high social status (meaning someone not engaged in manual labor and therefore not exposed to the sun). We read of how "femininity" is defined around body contours, and cosmetics, and how hormones are used by male-to-female transgenders. We go beyond the visual, reading about the importance of controlling or enhancing body odors among tour guides, who interestingly are especially concerned about the bad odor management of their foreign customers, using car perfumes to keep their work manageable and we learn how difficult it is for security guards to stay alert during their long shifts. Energy drinks and cigarettes help them perform their duties.

All these transformations through what the French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault has called "technologies of the self" are as paradoxical as Palawan. On the surface, the products—which are technologies—seem to be mainly in the realm of the self but are, in reality, pushed, through marketing, from the outside, in contexts of inequality and exploitative labour relations. Personal aspirations are not personal but are for predefined standards of modernity, related to work-related demands and expectations. The self must be made presentable to the tourist, to the customers in malls, and to those who may threaten the properties that young people protect.

It is not surprising that these transformations become problematic for the “self.” The skin whiteners, the hormones, the body deodorants, and the energy drinks are expensive and can distort budgetary priorities. The money for tonic drinks, for example, could well go into more nutritious food.

The tragedy, too, many of the products used are of doubtful safety and efficacy. Even the energy drinks have much too high levels of caffeine that can cause cardiac palpitations. Cosmetics and the skin whiteners imported from China and unregistered with the Food and Drug Administration may contain toxic chemicals like mercury. But even registered skin whiteners can be problematic, their so-called “skin-whitening effect” coming about because they take away the upper layers of the skin, leaving behind a red glow (seen as “whitening”) which is actually inflammation. The whitened skin fails to protect against the sun, leading to adverse effects such as black spots.

Ultimately though, the problems come with the very definition of the self. As the reports show, young people use the chemicals with some ambivalence, knowing how expensive they are and experiencing some of the undesirable side effects. There is, too, doubt about whether what they’re doing is indeed “good,” captured by how IP women will put on cosmetics only when they’re away from home and about to go to work. The cosmetics have to be removed before they return home because they are not socially acceptable.

The research reports are not for Palawan alone. It must make us more critical and discerning as we revisit concepts of development and exploitation, modernity and tradition, self and community. The chemicals, in many ways, are like the products used in precolonial barter trade. For the Chinese, the beeswax and the sea cucumbers, for the inhabitants of Palawan the ceramics, represented faraway lands. To have those products gave prestige.

Today, the skin whiteners and tonic drinks and other chemicals described in this anthology represent modernity with promises of not just of a more attractive self, but of better jobs, a better life.

We are proud to have worked with the Palawan State University, and the people of Palawan, to gather powerful narratives that will now

challenge the outside, the purveyors of modernity, to be more critical and discerning, the chemicals now to be seen not just as stuff applied to the biological body, but as powerful shapers of social bodies.