

Filipino Culture and Identity

by
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Anyone who has some acquaintance with logic and semantics at all, gets an idea of the difficulties encountered in defining a word, particularly an abstract and generic term. For one thing, there are the logical requirements. For example, in a logical definition, one should bring out the Five Heads of Predicables, two of which are genus and species. The determination of genus and species involves, among other things, classification and division. A definition, consequently, entails these two processes. Now, a term can be divided in various ways, depending on the *fundamentum divisionis* or on the universe of discourse. When you

come to the other heads of predicables — property, differentia and accident — the problem is more complicated and more difficult. In fact, as the noted semanticist, Hayakawa, has observed, even the dictionary cannot always make the meaning of a word sufficiently clear and exact. There are contextual, rhetorical, and syntactical factors to take into account. As a witty person has quipped, “We know many things until we are asked.”

Let us now consider the word “culture.” The word is variously defined according to the various philosophies of culture and of the human spirit which is regarded as the center of culture. Take for

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example, the Hegelian idealists, prominently represented in our time by the Italian philosopher, Gentile. In his famous work, *The Reform of Education*, Gentile offers the concept of culture as the human spirit itself in its activity of becoming and that to determine the attributes of culture, we must first define the nature of spirit.

In Webster's Seventh Collegiate Dictionary, there are half a dozen definitions of the term culture, among which are the following:

- a) A particular stage of advancement in civilization;
- b) the characteristic features of such a stage;
- c) behavior typical of such a group.

Adler, in his volume, *Great Ideas from Great Books*, gives also several definitions in his answer to the question, "What is culture?" I quote below some of the definitions:

In its basic meaning, the term culture signifies improvement or perfection of nature. Culture, in its widest sense, is the sum total of the spiritual, material, and social improvements of a community. For some thinkers, culture is primarily a state of mind, secured through education in the liberal arts and embodied in philosophy, pure science, and the fine

arts. For still others, it is a pattern of social institutions, traditional beliefs and customs, and material techniques and objects.

A word may be defined, as you know, either in its generic sense or in its particular meaning. In its generic connotation, the term, "culture" may be defined, as Adler suggests, in the widest sense, as "the sum total of spiritual, material, and social improvements of a human community" or as "a pattern of social institutions, traditional beliefs and customs and material techniques and objects." In its particular sense, culture refers to the characteristic or distinguishing features of such pattern of institutions, beliefs and ways of living of a particular community, society or people, as for example, the Greek culture, the culture of the Incas, etc.

On the basis of the particular meaning, Filipino culture is the organic blending of Oriental and Western elements, or more specifically, of Malayan, Spanish, and American components. Any meaningful study or discussion of our culture should, in my opinion, take this concept as starting-point or plane of reference. In their nationalistic fervor, some of us talk as if our actual culture were still only predominantly Malayan; that

is, our culture before we came under the tutelage of Spain and America. On the other extreme, there are the few who talk as if the Malayan or indigenous elements had all but "gone with the wind," leaving only the Western features functioning in our individual and collective ways of living and thinking. The truth is that in the vicissitudes of our history, many Occidental threads have become firmly and, on the whole, happily, woven into the fabric of our culture together with the threads of Malayan culture.

The different components of our culture function in varying strength in varying moments and events of our on-flowing life as individuals and as a people. Some native elements occasionally come into play more or less consciously and are even dominant, albeit transiently. For instance, while conversing in English or Spanish, we now and then turn to our native dialect, even those of us who are English or Spanish speaking. Or again, even the most Westernized and sophisticated among us occasionally call for some native foods in preference to Spanish and American dishes, which are their staple foods. Conversely, while

talking together in our mother tongue, we now and then turn to English or Spanish as naturally as we turn to the dialect while conversing in the language of Shakespeare or that of Cervantes. The same is true of the matter of manners and etiquette, and while sojourning in some foreign country; in unexpected moments we experience nostalgic longings for our folksongs and yearn for the sights of sunny or moonlit landscapes in our native land. In Freudian terms, the different elements that constitute our actual culture bubble up in unpatterned alternations from the depth of our subconscious and rise to our consciousness only to sink back into our subconscious.

But I think it is false and misleading to conceive of our culture and our authentic identity in terms of elements that have become momentarily detached and isolated from the total matrix which is the organic compound of the constituent ingredients – the indigenous, and the exotic elements which we have adopted and assimilated.

Here, I believe, is at least one reason why it is really difficult to answer such questions as "What is Filipino culture?"

We may now take up the question, "What is Filipino

identity?" Over the years, I have watched and reflected on varying notions brought out in conferences, seminars and forums about this and related questions, especially in connection with the national language problem. If we take, as in my opinion we should, the definition of Filipino culture I suggested a while ago, much of the confusion and difficulty will peter out. Thus, if we define a Filipino as a person imbued with the Filipino culture, as defined, such matters as where one lives, what dialect or language one uses, and what is the color of one's skin or eyes, will not be so likely to cause confusion and controversy. For, surely, a person is no less a Filipino just because he lives abroad or because his skin is not brown or because he speaks English or Spanish most of the time, or because on the other hand, he does not talk Pilipino. Rizal wrote very little in Tagalog, but as we all know, his most important works were written in Spanish. When he wrote his *Noli* and *Fili*, his *Last Farewell* and his *Flowers of Heidelberg*, was he any less a Filipino? Remember, the original of our National Anthem was in Spanish. Felipe, Rizal and Lopez Jaena used Spanish as the most

effective medium for their thoughts and sentiments as true sons of the native land, that is, as true Filipinos. The same can be said of nearly all our educated heroes and leaders and prominent writers in both Spanish and English, to this day: they were not less Filipinos just because they spoke and wrote in Spanish or English. The distinguished Mexican educator, I. Sanchez, in his book *Revolution through Education* says in effect, "We are Indians in blood and in thought and sentiment but we express ourselves in Spanish."

On the other hand, just because a person writes in his native vernacular or in Pilipino he is not, just for that reason, necessarily a true Filipino, especially if what he expresses is alien and inimical to our culture in its content and in its spirit. For aught we know, he may be merely rendering into Pilipino or in his dialect some alien idea or sentiment.

We may with some justification and propriety, state that when a native of our country uses Spanish or English, to that extent at that moment of his duration, he is not expressing himself completely or purely as a Filipino, and similarly,

when he uses his dialect, at such moment and "in so far forth," he is not, for want of a more precise expression, a representative Filipino. A representative Filipino, in the cultural sense, uses at least two languages — his native dialect which is his true mother tongue and either English or Spanish. However, since many Western elements have seeped down to the humble levels of our population and have spread throughout the land, the great masses of our people who have little or no functional knowledge of English or Spanish, can nevertheless be properly regarded as Filipinos; that is, as people with Filipino culture, although as I have intimated, they are not culturally representative Filipinos.

In politics, there seems little room for disagreement for our government and political institutions, in concepts and terminology and in organization, methods and processes are undeniably modern and Western, that is, American and Spanish. In religion, Christianity, in the form introduced by Spain and America, is obviously a pervasive and distinguishing element in our culture. As for language, the picture is not so clear in some of its parts. The vernaculars still persist and are "very much alive"

even as they interact with English and Spanish. The major dialects have been significantly affected by English and Spanish, but being mother-tongues, they will survive in our culture. They will continue to function in our life and therefore, in our culture, in answer to needs in expressing thoughts and feelings which cannot be faithfully and adequately conveyed in an adopted language.

The Spanish language, although it has considerably diminished in its use among us, yet, as the language of Spanish culture, will remain because so much of that culture has become deeply embedded in our own culture mainly through the works of Filipino writers in Spanish and through the Catholic Church and educational, social and cultural institutions.

As regards English, although it has been with us for a much shorter time than has Spanish, its influence on, and contributions to, our culture has been entirely out of proportion to the span of time it has been with us. In several respects, it has become a stronger and more dynamic element in our blended culture. Despite the ill-advised moves, though perhaps without malicious intent, on the part of over-zealous promoters of the

so-called national language, at the expense of English and also of Spanish, nevertheless, English has so enriched our culture and has so proved its great and abundant utility that it has won warm and eager acceptance throughout the length and breadth of our country and among the vast majority of our people. Furthermore, in general and on the whole, English has not proved itself incompatible with, or inimical to, the valid elements in the indigenous aspects of our culture. On the contrary, through such concepts as freedom, democracy, reasoned faith, equality before the law, and dignity of labor, English has contributed strong, vital threads into the weaving of the fabric of our culture.

In closing let me turn again to the question "What is our Filipino

identity?" Stated more concretely, what constitutes our oneness and distinguished us from peoples of other lands? I wish to suggest that the proper answer is, the pattern of our blended culture, as I have defined it; that is, our culture not merely as content and form but as spirit. For my idea of culture is that it is not merely the sum total or pattern of our institutions, beliefs, material possessions and mode of living. In its deeper and ultimate meaning, culture is spirit — the spirit that creates, animates and sustains the pattern as content and form. We can have an understanding of the nature of that spirit from an understanding of the character of the culture which it has produced and which it unfolds and develops throughout its duration. ■