

Philippine Cultural Development - A Brief Reassessment

Demy P. Sonza

I am happy to share with you my humble thoughts on the suggested subject of "socio-cultural transformation." I have, however, titled my paper "Philippine Cultural Development - A Brief Reassessment." The key word in this topic is *culture*.

As Ralph Liston puts it, "the culture of society is the way of life of its members: the collection of ideas and habits which they learn, share, and transmit from generation to generation." E. B. Taylor defines culture as the complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." This complex whole or sum total, in the case of Philippine culture, includes aspects of life "borrowed" from the Arabs, Indians, Chinese, Indonesians, Spaniards, Americans, Japanese and all other peoples with whom we have had culture contacts.

This brings us a new term, *cultural contact*, and a few more that we have to define before we proceed further with the discussion: terms like *acculturation*, *borrowing* and *invention*. The meeting of two different cultures is cultural contact, while the accepting of traits and patterns and values from each other is acculturation. The process of accepting material objects,

values, and ways of behaving is known as "borrowing."

All cultures are purposeful. The mores, conventions, and practices of a culture exist for a definite purpose and fit into a complex system in which the parts are so inter-dependent that one aspect cannot be altered without altering other patterns.

There is another term connected with cultural contact that must be defined and this is *invention*. Invention is the altering or synthesis of pre-existing materials, conditions or practices so as to produce a new form of material or condition or practice. For example, when the Filipino took the surplus US Army jeep, painted it in a rainbow of colors and used it as a vehicle for transporting passengers, that is no longer borrowing; it is invention. Inventions are incorporated in a culture to enhance the culture and not to destroy it.

Now we are ready to make a brief reassessment of Philippine cultural development from its ancient roots to the present in the light of foreign or external cultural encounters and internal forces. Let me make it clear at this point, however, that the thoughts I share with you are very tentative. Let us say that I am presenting my views as the take-off points of discussion.

* Delivered before participants in the Junior Executive Training (JET) program, sponsored by the Civil Service Commission, Region VI, at the Sarabia Manor Hotel, Iloilo City, 23 February 1978.

Ancient Roots of Filipino Culture

The culture history of the Philippines is extremely complex and ancient. Man has been here for a long time. Prehistorians and anthropologists say that he was here since the Pleistocene Period, about 250,000 to 300,000 years ago. This dating is by no means absolute. It was reached by inference through the study of archeological artifacts that bear the imprint of human use. The oldest human remains discovered in the Philippines so far is the Tabon Man Skull fragment which according to carbon-14 dating is at least 22,000 years old.

Geographically located near the Asiatic mainland, the Philippines was not spared from the impacts of cultural and historical developments which took place in mainland Asia and spread to the regions of Southeast Asia and the Pacific. For thousands of years diverse cultural influences—Arabic, Indian, Chinese, Indonesian, Siamese, Malayan, Japanese, etc.—continued to shape and reshape the lifeways of the early Filipinos.

The prehistoric portion of our cultural history is difficult to reconstruct, but with the data so far assembled, we may divide, as anthropologist F. Landa Jocano has done, our prehistoric cultural development into four periods, namely, Germinal Period, Formative Period, Incipient Period, and Emergent Period.

Germinal Period—approximately 250,000 to 10,000 B.C. This represents the earliest temporal dimension in our culture history. There were few people and community-type dwelling was unknown. Economic life was by hunting and gathering. By 30,000 B.C., there appeared signs of the first use of stone tools beginning with crude hand-axes. As time moved on, perhaps from 22,000 to 10,000 years ago, new tool-types were manufactured. There appeared round, oval, and kidney-shaped stone tools.

Formative Period—approximately 10,000 to 500 B.C. New types of stone tools, beautifully polished and sharp, were made. Because of more efficient tools, the people were able to exploit their environment more effectively. Little by little they learned to domesticate wild plants and planted them in cleared patches of land. This gave way to agriculture and a more settled way of life. The more sedentary nature of living differentiates this period from the previous one. That is why we call this the Formative Period. It was at this time when groups of people bigger than the family began to form.

Incipient Period—500 B.C. to 10th Century A.D. This marked the beginning of dramatic changes in the lifeways of the ancient Filipinos. By incipient we mean the beginning of the leveling of local cultural differences. This was made possible because of the appearance of metal tools and the increased use of agriculture as the major means of extracting a living. The people became more and more settled.

Pottery began during this period. The art of smelting and forging iron and the manufacture of glass beads also started. Weaving was introduced into the islands from Indonesia. Wet agriculture which had begun earlier became extensive. Terraced and dyked fields were built. Toward the end of this period, influences from the neighboring countries stimulated dramatic changes in the way of life of the ancient Filipinos. Trade was the first stimulus of these contacts and the Arabs were the first foreigners to have direct relations with the islands.

Emergent Period—from the 10th Century A.D. to the 15th Century A.D. This period is called the Emergent Period because about this time a clearly definable Filipino social organization, institutional structure, and cultural pattern had emerged. Trade and commerce became extensive. Chinese-Filipino relations began during this time, particularly during the Tang

Dynasty (618-907 A.D.). The Filipinos traded products like hardwood, edible nuts, fancy corals, gold, cotton, gums, resins, rattan, and pearls for Chinese products like silk and porcelain wares.

Indian influence was felt during the 10th century and became strongly marked during the 12th century with the rise of the Sri-Vijaya Empire in Java. Chinese influence in the Philippines was more economic than social and cultural. Food habits of Filipinos today show strong Chinese influence. Scholars estimate that elements of Chinese ancestry in the Philippines reached approximately ten per cent. Indian influence, on the other hand, is best seen in language, art, myth, and ritual epic.

The Emergent Period lasted until the coming of the Europeans. Now the question may be asked: What were the characteristics of Filipino society when the Spaniards came? From available data we learn that the pre-Spanish Filipinos lived in small, scattered communities, located usually near the seas, rivers, lakes and on off-shore islands. Communities formed independent and separate social, political, and economic entities. However, community alliances were established by marriage and blood brotherhood. Leadership in the group was normally assumed by the oldest man in the community.

Social organization was based upon kinship which was bilaterally structured, uniformly stratified, and traditionally rooted. The elementary family was the basic unit of the kinship system. Older folks were regarded with respect. Genealogical recognition usually reached up to the third ascending generation. Beyond that ancestors were either forgotten or were associated with deified spirits.

Marriage was arranged between parents and involved elaborate ceremonies of gift-giving. The newly wed

couple generally lived with either the boy's or the girl's parents. The birth of the first child formalized the marriage.

The house of the early Filipinos were made of bamboo with thatched grass or palm leaves for roofing. Economic activities were already diversified. The major farm crops were rice, gabi, and bananas. Pigs, chickens, dogs, and carabaos were domesticated. Wheeled vehicles were not known and the transporting of goods was done by sleds on land and by rafts and bancas on water.

Religion was so interwoven with the life of the people that it would be difficult to distinguish what was social and what was religious in their daily affairs. Elaborate rituals were practiced in connection with planting, harvesting, travelling, house building, and other economic activities. The *babaylan* (medium) performed all community religious ceremonies.

At the time of Spanish contact, the Filipinos had a system of writing. There were at least sixteen different ethnic groups in the Islands who utilized a form of syllabic writing. Today only three of these have retained their system of writing.

Contact with Spanish Culture

How did contact with Spanish culture affect the Filipinos? Did it destroy the indigenous culture and supplant another culture?

When the Spaniards came to the Philippines, Spain was one of the most advanced nations in the world. Some of the important features of Spanish culture that were brought here were the Catholic religion, the Spanish language, and the Spanish system of government that tried to unify the country as it had never been unified before.

The Catholic religion which believes in life after death, angels and saints, and sacrifices was easily accepted by the Filipinos who had also beliefs in life after death, spirits and sacrifices. Fr. Raymund Quetchenbach notes one good example of a Catholic practice that was readily "borrowed" by the people—All Souls' Feast. The Filipinos accepted this practice because it answered a cultural need which was the preservation of the ties with dead members of the family. In fact, when Filipinos found out that the Catholic church did not have a practice for extended presence with the dead after death, the *novena* for the dead was invented.

On the other hand, the church law requiring regular Sunday attendance at the holy mass was greatly ignored by Filipinos, especially the men. They reasoned out that as long as the family was represented at the religious services the obligation for individual members was satisfied. So it has become a practice even to this day that only women members of the family attend church regularly.

In the case of the Spanish language, it was never accepted by the people as a whole as it was done in South American countries where Spanish replaced the local languages. In the Philippines, Spanish was a socio-static device that separated the ruling rich minority from the subordinate poor majority. Those Filipinos who found the borrowing of Spanish profitable did so; those who saw little use for it rejected the language.

As to the Spanish government, the people submitted to it when overpowered or when convenient. The "piratical" raids by men from Brunei and Sulu on the Visayas and parts of Luzon made the people of these areas seek the protection of the Spanish government. Yet all throughout the Spanish regime there were sporadic revolts. The Moslem South was never

conquered and finally, in 1896, the Filipinos rose in a nation-wide revolution.

To quote Fr. Quetchenbach, "Spanish culture appears to have left Filipino culture essentially intact. When there was borrowing or invention this served to reenforce the basic Filipino culture rather than indicate the acceptance of the foreign culture."

Contact with American Culture

Next to the Spaniards came the Americans who ruled the country for about fifty years. The American form of government was imposed on the Philippines and English was introduced as the medium of popular education. What happened to these aspects of culture contact?

The form of government with elected representatives to Congress became a means for the continuation of the pre-American rule by the rich families, the *caciques*. Political dynasties arose. The American form of government was developed in the United States as an answer to the unique needs of American historical experience, and its imposition on the Filipinos who had an entirely different set of values, mores, and experiences doomed it to rejection. It was finally rejected by Proclamation 1081 when Congress was abolished and the government structure was reorganized.

Like Spanish, the English language did not become the vehicle of communication of the Filipino people despite its use as the medium of instruction in schools and by the mass media. While English remains as one of our official national languages (together with Filipino and Spanish), it is evidently being rejected by the government. We only have to look at the writings on the peso bills and on many government documents to notice this. In Manila and in several big centers of

the country, rich and educated Filipinos who in the past would not want to be caught speaking in the vernacular in public, are now using Tagalog (or Filipino) with pride. There is a large number of English - as well as Spanish - words that have gained entrance into the native vocabularies but these are adopted to fit Filipino linguistic characteristics like pronunciation and spelling. The emergence of the so-called "Taglish" (Tagalog-English) and "Ilonglish" (Ilongo-English) is an interesting case of how the Filipinos are borrowing words from English to suit their need and even their idiosyncracies.

In assessing our cultural contact with America, we find that those aspects of American culture which reenforced and were harmonious with Filipino life were accepted and inculturated, while those aspects which did not reenforced Filipino culture were opposed.

The Philippines was under Japan for a few years but it seems that the contact did not produce any appreciable influence on Filipino culture. The Filipino experience with the Japanese military presence was perhaps too unpleasant to produce any considerable cultural influence.

Our brief survey of Filipino culture and its contacts with the so-called "Great Traditions" of China and India and with the cultures of Spain and the United States suggests the conclusion that Filipino culture is essentially whole and that it has come out of the experience with borrowed materials, values, and practices but only when these borrowed features improved and reenforced Filipino culture.

In reviewing our culture history we cannot fail to notice one significant thing - its dynamism. Out of the dramatic succession of events in the past developed a Filipino way of life and emerged a Filipino cultural identity -

an image which is composite in structure but integrated in form. It is the diversity in historical and cultural experiences that has given the Filipino culture its dynamism, its ability to draw from numerable strands of external influences and blend them together into something uniquely Filipino. It has matured through the years, transcending the past by incorporating it in its structure. That is why it has the toughness of the molave and the resiliency of the bamboo.

Cultural Progress in the Future

What can we say about cultural progress in the future? We are now in a period of rapid changes and science and technology are bringing the cultures and peoples of the world into greater interaction than ever.

Yet much of the tension in Filipino society is due not so much to cultural contact with other cultures as to internal factors, most significantly the shift within the Philippines as it progresses from a rural, agricultural society into an urban and industrialized society. This shift is made by the desire of the Filipinos to raise their socio-economic standard of living. The movement of people from the rural areas to the cities is breaking up the extended family. Living on a fixed income is making necessary the limitation of the number of children. Urban life is removing the bonds of social control of the small, intimate village and allowing freedom of behavior unthought of before.

The needs and pressures of the time call for change and constant adaptability. As Secretary Juan L. Manuel says, "This is particularly true with our national culture which, in the face of the challenges that history has hurled upon us, has to seek out ways and means of remoulding and strengthening its authenticity so that our identity as a people may reemerge in total affirmation."

In the coming of the New Society we find a cultural renaissance. The political system has been dismantled and a new governmental model more in accord with Filipino culture is being built. The economic structure of Philippine society is also being reshaped, starting with land reform, in order to democratize wealth.

The main lines of our cultural resurgence are laid down in the New Constitution which provides for the development of a democratic culture accessible to every Filipino, fosters the growth of the arts and letters, assures adequate protection to the artistic, literary, and scientific works of its citizens, and grants awards, scholarships, and other incentives for our outstanding citizens. These constitutional provisions are implemented by presidential decrees designed to protect and preserve ethnic traditions, to satisfy the cultural interests and needs of our people, to enhance the activities of cultural institutions, and to infuse new vigor and activity into the intellectual and artistic life of the nation.

With President and Mrs. Marcos at the vanguard, the cultural renaissance takes the form of concrete projects like the Cultural Center of the Philippines, the Folk Arts Theater, the National Art Center. Many cultural incentives are being offered, like the National Artist Award and the Repub-

lic Cultural Heritage Award. The National Artist Award is by far the most prestigious award that a Filipino citizen can win. When one is proclaimed a National Artist, he is given ₱10,000 during the awarding ceremony, a ₱2,000 monthly pension for life, free hospital and medical care, a seat of honor in all public ceremonies, and when he dies he is given a state funeral at government expense while his heirs collect insurance money in the amount of ₱50,000.

To give due importance to culture, the former Department of Education is now the Department of Education and Culture. Under this department are several agencies and offices that look after the preservation and promotion of Filipino culture - like the National Library; National Historical Institute, National Museum and Institute of National Language.

Finally, to set the example to our people and to inspire them to love our cultural heritage, President Marcos is taking time from his heavy schedule as Chief Executive of the Republic to write a history of the Filipino people.

With the direction, support, and encouragement that the government is giving, there is no doubt that we can look forward to greater cultural heights.