

Reality and Filipino Scholarship

My most important bonafide in addressing you is my age: I am ninety and much older than all of you. This age has endowed me with so much hindsight. As you know, hindsight is the lowest form of wisdom—but wisdom just the same. I now have a much broader understanding of time as history, of time as the ultimate arbiter of conflicts, human dilemmas, political controversies. For instance, even if we did not oppose Marcos, we would have simply waited for him to die—which he did. Yes, it is difficult to divine the future but if we looked hard enough—and this is what scholarship is supposed to do—in the fifties and the sixties when we were the richest, most modern country in Southeast Asia but with visionless, corrupt leaders, we could have foreseen then that we would now be the “sick man” of the region.

It is necessary then for us to appreciate history, learn from it particularly if this knowledge helps us know ourselves better.

So many givens are in our culture but these givens, though obvious, are often not recognized because of our personal biases motivated by ethnicity, or nationalism, the search for identity—all these feelings passionately aroused in us who regard our origins as the bedrock of nation.

For instance, many of our scholars want our country to be identified with Asia. This is a logical aspiration for there is no denying that we are, indeed, in Asia. But the two great religions of this region—Buddhism and Hinduism, did not really take root here: the Spaniards came and Christianized us; over the original native culture, they imposed this Catholic patina which survived three hundred years and influenced our lives.

We are, therefore, heirs to the Greco-Roman tradition that Christianity brought. The classical aspects of culture which the Hindus and the Buddhists implanted in the Asian region and in the Asian mind did not develop here; much of our culture then is folk.

The Western aspects of our culture are subsumed in our arts.

So many of our cultural workers are bent on preserving and encouraging the culture of our ethnic minorities. After all, if we are truly looking for indigenous sources of cultural pride, it is in these ethnic achievements. We must beware, however, of the tendency to transform these cultures into museum specimens, to freeze them in time. What we must do is assist our benighted minorities to modernize so they can compete in the market for jobs. The avenues to modernity and, most of all, to justice must not be denied them even by well-meaning cultural workers who want their traditional way of life preserved.

Scholars on folk culture—like specialists everywhere—talk among themselves; they cannot see how folk culture opens the door to many development possibilities. Folklorists wallowing in myths and native epics should have their knowledge transmitted to creative writers who will then transform such epics and myths into a larger, nobler literary vision. The same with our musicologists, our folk dance scholars. The creation of fresh, vigorous artistic forms—these can be inspired by our folk culture: such innovations will then acquire a distinct Filipino face with which we can identify, about which we can exalt.

Folklorists have conferences but they never invite creative writers, poets, and composers to attend. They miss out in giving relevance and practical use of their knowledge.

HISTORY

There is so much to unearth in our unrecorded past. Although archeological findings illustrate that these islands were inhabited more than two thousand years ago, no written record of our ancient forefathers are extant; the oldest which was found some years back in a Laguna riverbed is not more than 900 years old. Ancient gold artifacts have, of course, been found to attest to the high scientific culture of our ancestors. But compared to our neighbors with their august and remembered past, its relics and monuments, we are a young nation, indeed. And our history, more often than not, is written by our colonizers. It is our duty now to write our own history, to popularize this history, remembering always that memory as recorded history—is the granite foundation of any nation.

We must now write this history from our point of view, from the bottom up and not from the top down. All too often, historians are

concerned only with front page events, the powerful men who created these events. Look at history not from this rarified perspective but from the eye level of the *masa*. Listen, journalism is history in a hurry, but literature is history that is lived.

THE TWO CULTURES

Sometime in the mid-1950s the English scientist C.P. Snow postulated that a wide chasm has grown between the humanist and the scientific cultures. This observation is still valid today as it applies not just to the West but to us. The divide is not just between cultures but between social classes—the very many who are poor, and the very few who are rich. This division impacts on almost everything not just on values but on thinking. It explains the crippling ignorance of the *masa* who cannot afford a college education and, therefore, a better life and an intelligent view of our political system. If the *masa* votes for dumb movie stars and media celebrities to the highest public office, it is because they are shallow.

In looking at our unexamined past, at our lower classes, our very poor, and the rebel movements, we also unlock the basic ethos of nationhood. The efforts of our scholars to probe deeply into the thinking of the peasantry, of the lumpen in our villages, should be appreciated. Among these well-intentioned scholars is Rey Ileto whose *Pasyon and Revolution* attracted so much attention some three decades ago. The problem with that study is not so much the emphasis on the *Pasyon* and the lower classes as such but the misinterpretation of the *Pasyon's* influence on the *masa*. This is not so—the *Pasyon* is brought out only during the Holy Week and is then completely forgotten. It is the old Latin mass and the story of Christ that hold great influence on the imagination, the beliefs and rituals of the *masa*. How could Rey miss this? Simple. Like most scholars who can afford college and get their MAs and PhDs, Rey is middle class—he has not lived with the peasant.

This ignorance of the *masa*, of the quasi-religious nature of mass movements, could lead to avoidable tragedies such as the massacre in 1965 of Valentin delos Santos's *Lapiang Malaya* followers in Taft Avenue. If the government only knew, instead of a platoon of soldiers confronting the peasant demonstrators—they killed many—Malacañang should have sent a Tagalog politician overdressed in the regalia of a general—braid, epaulets, and all that color—to mollify them, and that he—a leading Filipino leader—will attend to their grievances then send them back to their villages with a jeepful of goodies.

ETHNICITY

Filipino scholarship must recognize ethnicity for it is very real and divisive. The late F. Landa Jocano, who was making an ethnic map in the fifties, after several weeks of living in the Ilocos, said, Ilocanos are different.

Of course, they are distinct from the Tagalogs, the Visayans. Even the Moros are different from one another; the Maranaos, the Maguindanaos, the Tausugs—they are not united. Even among themselves, clans have existed for generations generating deadly clan wars.

In the sixties, a book titled *Sikolohiyang Filipino*, actually defined Tagalog psychology, not that of Filipinos as a people.

INDIGENIZE SCHOLARSHIP

So many institutions of higher learning—many of them comparable with the best in the world are now in the Philippines. There is no justification now for a Filipino scholar to go to Europe or the United States to obtain a doctorate on the Cordillera people. It is more than appreciating our educational system. Western ideas, doctrinaire theories concocted by Western scholars do not always apply to native conditions. Take for instance Marxism and EDSA I. Our communists were so doctrinaire, they did not consider the “objective reality”—meaning the reality in relation to EDSA I. They were not there because Marxist doctrine made no difference between Marcos and Cory Aquino—both represented the elite, the oligarchs. So the communists missed their greatest chance to capture power.

Then there is Ben Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* three decades back which so many of our scholars immediately applauded and used in defining our country. Ben Anderson has written laudably on Rizal as a unique novelist produced by Spanish colonialism which other colonized communities in Asia have not done. He may be right in defining some organizations like ASEAN or the European Union as “imagined communities” but not countries that developed out of a strong sense of nationalism. In fact, nationalism will be with us far into the future as the major force in the shaping of nation-state relationships. The term *patriotism* is more appropriate, for nationalism can be claimed by everyone—it is after all, “the last refuge of scoundrels.”

Foreigners can easily misinterpret local customs and rituals. An American went to Pampanga during the Holy Week. He saw the reenactment of the crucifixion, devotees whipping, cursing, and hitting the Christ as he carried the cross. The visitor was appalled and remarked how cruel the Filipinos were. He didn't know they were pious Catholics merely enacting the vicious treatment of Jesus by the Jews as he was brought to Calvary.

Even the name of your Center should be indigenized. Why do you accept the terminology concocted by a Westerner from his comfortable position? There is no such thing as a Third World—there is only one world, rich and poor countries, countries with varying political order. And all countries—rich and poor, authoritarian and democratic—are in a state of flux and development.

PURE SCIENCE

It has been said that there is actually no limit to the extension of knowledge. If there is no limit to knowledge, then there is also no limit to progress. The need to know is very much a part of our humanity but remember that old injunction that curiosity killed the cat. It is when we are confronted with the vastness of the universe as well as the human mind that we should then think also of what knowledge is for, if it will serve science's unlimited quest, the need to know, or the much higher purpose of ennobling humanity itself.

Sure, for the scientist engaged in the study of insects, it is important for him to find out the mating habits of spiders, and who knows, that knowledge may lead to the discovery of drugs that would lead to the cure of cervical cancer. Or who knows, the study of the atomic particles of volcanic magma may lead to the manufacture of industrial diamonds!

The implication here is that pure science may yield important discoveries that will benefit humankind—and it also may not. For a country then whose resources are limited, whose scholars have many more important subjects to delve into that will benefit the commonweal, the pursuit of pure science is a luxury. Let the rich nations with their vast resources pursue it. A Filipino scientist can help our country more, for instance, in locating the medicinal values of indigenous plants, how to control the pests that destroy rice, coconut, or prevent schistosomiasis.

KNOWLEDGE IS NOT WISDOM

With the Internet, Wikipedia, and Google, there is hardly any reason now for most people to be stupid. Information on almost any subject is now available with just one click. Still, there is information not available on the Internet and this information can only be obtained through personal experience, a tenacious memory of our past. And most of all, we must always remember that knowledge is not wisdom. It is how knowledge is used that is wisdom.

And this wisdom—the truest and most valued—is also the unending search for truth.

And what is truth?

As the Chinese said, we searched and searched for truth but in the end there is no truth. Of course, there is truth both as an abstraction and as reality, and both also have value until we, as human beings, give it, when we equate truth with justice in action or else truth is not truth at all.

Justice in action. This, scholars should always remember.

So they get to know the secrets of the atom, the origin of life, and they know now how to split the atom, create life by cloning, even create artificial intelligence as well. But in the end, of what use are these discoveries of truth?

Truth as justice in action is giving reality to an abstraction. For instance, if we see injustice—and by God, there is so much brutal evidence of it in this country—we correct that injustice by acting. That is truth, meaning, value.

All of us seek justification for our brief, trivial lives, for role models to follow, to guide us. We need not look elsewhere, to the West and its traditions we have imbibed. In fact for us Filipinos, a sterling exemplar already exists—a man of prodigious intellect and iron commitment not only to truth but to his unhappy country.

We celebrate his 154th birthday this month—Jose Rizal.✿

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