

LATIN QUALITIES IN BRAZIL AND THE PHILIPPINES

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1. *Latin culture beyond Europe.*

A FAMOUS BRAZILIAN NEGRO ONCE EXPRESSED HIMSELF IN A SPEECH AS follows: "Nosotros, miembros de la raza latina . . ."¹ Gilberto Freyre, a penetrating Brazilian sociologist, interpreted this phrase as "a most eloquent" utterance—that of the Brazilian Negro with a European literary education who considers himself not only as a Brazilian citizen, but also as a member of the larger family of the Latin race.² Freyre's observations implies that both the Indian and the Japanese in Brazil with a similar cultural background belong to the same intellectual or spiritual grouping of peoples.

The sense that binds Europeans culturally with other peoples of different stocks—the Algerians and the French, the Filipinos and the Spaniards, the Mongolians and the Russians—may be taken to mean that "Europeans" with a Graeco-Latin view or a Christian culture are found not only within the geographical boundaries of Europe, but also in other parts of the world, and that—among peoples of varied stocks living under different physical conditions. Thus, to speak of continental Europeans as the exclusive exponents of Western-Latin thought would be to ignore certain humanistic concepts or practices that stem from Western-Latin sources, but are found also outside Europe. In a way, the spread of the European Christian influence overseas to the Americas may be taken as the repetition of a similar event that occurred during the expansion of the Holy Roman Empire over a thousand years ago, when new centers of Latin culture sprouted in various parts of Europe. In the twentieth century, the enlarged Latin sphere covers not only a wider geographical area, but also a greater variety of people. Thus, the explicit pronouncement of a black Latin in Brazil, "Nosotros, miembros de la raza latina . . .," finds an echo in the brown Oriental in the Philippines as "the Filipino with a Latin-Christian culture."

¹ Freyre, Gilberto, "El Negro en la cultura del Brazil," *El Correo* (publicación de la organización de las naciones unidas), Vol. V, nos. 8-9, (August-September, 1952), p. 8.

² *Loc. cit.*

2. In Brazil.

In Brazil, it is the Portuguese background of Christian and Latin "humanism," mixed with Moorish ideals and practices that nurtured the development of a new nation characterized by a natural respect for the personality of the individual, whatever be his physical type, color or culture. Nowhere else in the world is there a real amalgamation of Negroes and Europeans on as large a scale as in Brazil, where after centuries of miscegenation, one encounters men and women possessing the physical attributes of both races, and sensitivities and mores that are predominantly Latin. Whether in Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo, Bahia or Recife, it is not unusual to see fair-haired persons with kinky hair, bronzed-skinned individuals with blue eyes, or a red-haired lady with brown skin. Everywhere—in restaurants, movies, busses, homes, stores and streets—black and white people and men of different hues and physical features mix freely, without any conscious prejudice against each other's physical differences. In the words of Gilberto Freyre, "no European people engaged in colonizing America was less animated by a race-superiority or race-purity complex than the Portuguese, an almost non-European nation. Its unity or purity *mystique* was one of religion or religious status—the Roman Catholic religion or Christian status—and not one of race."³ In other words, Brazilians, in the manner of Mediterranean humanism, associated men with their spiritual personal qualities rather than with their physical differences.

While admitting the Latin-Iberian background of Brazilian history, Freyre considers Brazil as an "extra-European" nation that should find self-expression in accordance with its tropical and native environment. He says, "Brazil ought to maintain and develop the extra-European values and traditions already harmonized with tropical and Brazilian conditions of life, instead of abandoning them in order to become a cultural province of Europe or the United States."⁴ Furthermore, he adds that in this country, "the policy, the art, and the literature will be hypocritical whenever Brazil seeks to express herself intellectually and politically as an altogether white nation; whenever she acts as if her interests, her problems, and her ideals were those of a European or a sub-European nation, and not those of a really new and dynamic American community, not ashamed of its Amerindian, Jewish and African basic elements but proud of them."⁵

³ Freyre Gilberto, *Brazil, on Interpretation* (New York: Knopf, 1947), p. 123.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

3. *Brazil and the Philippines—similarities.*

The ideals and problems of present-day Brazil have a number of things in common with the Philippines, a country that has assimilated many cultural habits from a European country with a psychological and historical background very similar to that of Portugal. In Brazil and the Philippines the question of implanting Christian-Mediterranean concepts among people with a long tradition of equatorial living has involved an adjustment of temperate-zone habits to local conditions. In both countries the Iberians were confronted with the use of tropical food and vegetation, the problem of adapting Christian feasts to native celebrations, and the matter of understanding the consequences of a tropical climate, the native customs and decorum of the people, and their art. Although the Latin character is quite prominent in Brazilian and Philippine life, a tropical environment has changed it, such that there are probably more affinities between Brazilian and Philippine native characteristics than between these countries and the European nations that influenced them.

For example, many sights and public and private actions in Brazil recall a Philippine locale—the good number of churches where during masses men stay at the back, while their women-folk and children remain in front; the helter-skelter of traffic where buses out-race each other for more passengers; pedestrians jay-walking; car tires being changed in the middle of the street; the great problem of mass education; a friendliness from a passerby in down-town Salvador that could have been shown in Quiapo, Manila; the presence of side-walk vendors selling similar personal items—razor blades, combs, tooth pastes, belts, etc.; a predilection for political careers and white collar jobs; electoral speeches in *plazas*; a class-system based on the merits of a “good family”; an effervescent optimism among the people, and so forth.

4. *Differences.*

There are, of course, differences which lead the two countries towards different directions. In Brazil, the mixture of Latin and African ways has produced the classic *Mardi Gras*, which typifies a Brazilian's public enjoyment of life. In the Philippines, Latin and Malaysian ways of merry-making may be exemplified by the *fiesta*, where cock-fighting and other kinds of games take the place of the ritual public dances in Brazil, and where happy family reunions prevail in lieu of those public ceremonial street-dances with people mixing indiscriminately. New types of Afro-Latin music—*samba*, *maxixe*, *tanguinho*, *seresta*—appear in Brazil, to which correspond the Philippine native songs and dances—*kundiman*, *pandanggo*, *subli*, *kumintang*; these are typical Philippine-Malaysian interpretations of

European harmonic idioms. A distinctive dress of women in Bahia with a headkerchief and a bell-like skirt in fresh color-combinations, may be paralleled by the Philippine *mestiza* dress with the butterfly sleeves or by the *patadyong* with a loose chemise and a wrap-around skirt.

One big cultural distinction between Brazil and the Philippines lies in the use of language. The greater number of Portuguese that settled in Brazil far exceeds the number of Spaniards that lived in the Philippines. In Brazil this resulted in a mixed population that predominantly uses one mother tongue, while in the Philippines, the Malay Filipino is apt to speak the language of his sector of the archipelago, and a smaller segment of the population also speaks Spanish or, more frequently, English. Publications in Portuguese reach all Brazilian readers, while in the Philippines, literature that appears mostly in English is not read by very many of the reading public. In spite of this difference, similar problems in the literary field of expression occur in both countries. Brazilian and Philippine novels, essays, poems and short stories emulate Western techniques of writing but leave native lores, proverbs, legends, epics and tales less developed; thus, Western literary forms become a pivotal point of discussion and writing activity, while the native literary genre is neglected.

5. *Overpowering influence of Western aesthetic values.*

As in many other areas of daily life, aesthetic taste among Filipinos and other people living in the tropics are so dominated by European ways as to leave little room for initiative and originality. Likewise, it creates a certain artificiality in everyday conduct or behavior.

Take a trivial example like men's clothes. The original costume of pants, underpants, shirt, undershirt, coat, tie, hat, socks and leather shoes is suitable to a cold climate and a life of formal decorum but it is impractical in a climate of humidity, rain and sun, and uncomfortable for a people used to a more relaxed and less formal way of life. Yet, when the first European aristocrats brought this costume to the tropics along with their conventions of propriety, both the dress and the formal manners of conduct were copied and retained by the native population.

Today, this dress has been simplified to light pants and shirt, but even this pedestrian outfit emphasizes foreign norms of body wear and posture—a Hollywood stance, a formal manner equivalent to the European marks of good breeding, or simply a particular way of walking and sitting down. The latter leaves nothing whatsoever of native sartorial aesthetics to be developed and adapted to a contemporary society. However, there exists a sense of sartorial demeanor among people living in the tropics, uninfluenced by Western taste. This may be exemplified in the

colorful attire of the Igorot—bare, proportional, elegant—and more intricately, in the costumes of the Dayak of Borneo, or the Bororo of Brazil.

It may be incongruous to conceive of a modern man in the tropics clad in this attire, driving a car, holding a conference, or entertaining in a cocktail party. But it may be argued that his condescension to accept another dress foreign to his cultural habits and to his sense of aesthetics, has made him give up—under the duress of conformism—many things in the spiritual sphere, not only in the matter of dress but also in other things. To the native man assuming this cold-climate dress, any changes in style or proportion and in aesthetic attitudes would be guided by Western ways; and his spontaneous sense of lines, color and balance would be sublimated or almost completely lost. Thus, he becomes a perennial servant of foreign ideals in dress; he not only loses his natural postures, but tends to assume a different personality.

6. *Problem of adaptation or fusion.*

If we translate this picture into parallel situations in many other fields of Philippine life, a strong bias in favor of Western ways of living appears to predominate over the indigenous and non-Western. However, a change of perspective and direction is evidently in the air. While new theories of change keep streaming from the West itself—from Europe and the United States—it appears that another and perhaps richer source of ideas is needed and found in the very lives of native peoples all over the world, whose culture provides fresh grounds for another way of thinking, feeling and doing things. A mixture of Latin, African and Amerindian cultures in Brazil, as well as the interaction of Latin and native traits among a Malaysian people in the Philippines, furnish unique grounds for a meeting and mutual enrichment of these cultures. In these two countries, the fermentation of new creative ideas is enhanced by at least two factors, namely: the presence of small groups of men educated in the arts and sciences and searching for such a change; on a broader base-level, the existence of a larger community of people who live amidst the interacting ideologies of European and native civilizations.

In Bahia (in Brazil) for example, in the religious rites of the *candomblé*—an exorcism-ceremony emanating from West Africa—a certain portion of the white and black citizens participates in the dance ritual whose music has become a familiar sound among many Brazilians. For a musician interested in adapting this music into an urban setting, he has a public that is already familiar with this music; at the same time, he has the music itself that he can work on, to change or vary according to his own creativity.

In the Philippines, although many Filipinos have not heard of the *sulibaw* (a gong and drum ensemble), and may even regard it as a "foreign" instrument, its sounds are not really as strange to a Philippine ear as the French horn was when it was first heard by the local symphonic audience. The European brass wind instruments are entirely foreign to Asian soil, and the beauty of their sounds is not to be found in traditional Asian music. Hence, the psychological implications—the feelings, images, thoughts and reactions—that their blown reverberations evoke are not in the vocabulary of native concepts. If a local composer uses these instruments and their harmonies, he has to think necessarily as a European.

A novel musical treatment of the *sulibaw* along idioms of gong and drum sounds, and not according to European melodic structure and instrumentation, would be, for example, to try to bring out the larger possibilities of this instrumental ensemble by the interplay of various rhythms and by the exploration of instrumental colors. Another way to put the *sulibaw* in a contemporary setting is to have the ensemble play the original music before a present-day concert audience. But this performance should be an authentic and first-class rendition, and this would require the employment of the very best talents representing that music. For if this music is to appear as a cultivated art, it must have the discipline and skill demanded of that craft.

Similar treatments of other native and Asian art—in the fields of literature, sculpture and architecture—may be made by an artist who knows and lives the Asian and European cultures well. Herein lies the function of an artist-investigator who, on the one hand, observes and respects the role of art and intellectual values in a native culture, and, on the other hand, tries to separate certain native values for application to contemporary society. Examples in Brazil and the Philippines effecting a fundamental change in traditional European notions of artistic expression are but specimens of what can be unearthed in other native cultures elsewhere.

7. *Example from Brazil.*

An accolade long due to the value of native or non-European cultures finds sincere expression—among nations with a European culture—in Brazil; here, efforts to bring together and conciliate non-European cultural values of Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal and other African states with the Brazilian way of life are in progress. The *Centro de Estudos Afro-Orientais* at the *Universidade da Bahia* sponsors researches and cultural exchanges with these countries. From another quarter, there is a desire to see Brazil, Angola and Mozambique as members of a federation of countries with

Portuguese as a common language.⁶ Together with the presence of Africans in Brazil, the policy of rapprochement with Africa appears to base its strength in the country's actual experiences with European life—the Portuguese language, a half-white population and a large literary and artistic output based on European forms. This experience taught Brazil that not all European ways are conducive to Brazilian life, and it gave her the strength of will to reject the European point of view as the main source of her culture (for as it is felt, “the policy, the art, the literature will be hypocritical whenever Brazil seeks to express herself intellectually and politically as an altogether white nation”⁷); it also made her see this union of cultures as a source of new strength.

The Philippines—being a country with a small white minority, a modest literary and artistic production based on European forms, and with only the intelligentsia using the Spanish language—has no need of a European experience equal to that of Brazil—which has a half-white population, a majority of people speaking a European vernacular and a huge literary and artistic output. However, the Philippines does need the lesson of the Brazilian experience—that is, the futility of copying purely Western ways of thought and feeling, and implanting them unchanged in Philippine-Malaysian soil. Because of an inundation of Western concepts, the value of Asian artistic ways of expression is obscured and rendered old-fashioned, and it leaves the native artist in a condition of insecurity and confusion. He is in a situation similar to that of the average Filipino citizen today who is baffled by the conflicting moral and material values in a changing Philippine society.

8. *A step towards a solution—a deep appreciation and acceptance of both cultures.*

A solution lies in the revitalization of Asian concepts with the help of Western tools. The introduction, for example, of Asian theater, music and art (shadow play, Javanese *gamelan*, sculptures from different regions) in Philippine life, will not just be copying them, but will create an Oriental setting conducive to the meeting and enriching union of Eastern and Western artistic and literary values. In this environment, a free exchange and experimentation of Eastern and Western idioms of expression will contribute to a new world of harmonized cultures. For, while the view favoring the preservation of exclusive civilizations endures, the common aspiration of a growing number of people—individuals, groups and nations, who fully appreciate the accomplishments of non-European peoples and

⁶ Botsford, Keith, “Conversacion con Gilberto Freyre,” *Cuadernos*, 68 (January, 1963), p. 13.

⁷ Freyre, *loc. cit.*

seek to fuse them with Western thought—marks the beginning of a common ideology for a new community of nations who understand each other in the known spiritual fields of human endeavor—the arts, literature and music.

In the Philippine scene, with such a society deeply appreciative of the native and foreign cultures, the elite will feel less self-conscious when they greet or address each other in a foreign language, eat according to Western ways, or listen to the music of Donizetti and Beethoven. The modern Filipino's long intimacy with Latin ways would be counterbalanced by genuine Asian sentiments and perspective. A self-respect and confidence will grow out of this intimate understanding of one's native culture—that of a people who are not mere imitators or slaves of Western habits, but are originators, contributors, authors aiming at a good fusion of Latin and Malaysian cultures. Indeed, there are in the Philippines factors similar to those which characterize Brazil as a new type of civilization—as a nation making a “distinct contribution . . . to the development of human personality in the modern world.”⁸ But for the Philippines to fit such a role would demand much conscious effort—not only to understand intimately Asian thought, but also to live it fully, in a similar way that Filipinos have accepted and fused the Latin-Christian mores into the Philippine way of life.

⁸ *Loc. cit.*