

Introduction

What knowledge we have of Philippine culture we owe to whom I call the early scholar-miners. They searched for the ore beneath the surface, collected whatever they discovered to yield a rich lode, documented their process of retrieval, and in some instances, did preliminary assays to determine the value of what they gathered. Their efforts enabled other scholars and cultural researchers to explore on their own, add to what has already been collected, assess and reassess the findings, and take the process to a higher level of critiquing and possibly theorizing.

Those of us who began our own work on different aspects of Philippine arts and culture in the 1960s and throughout the 1970s know only too well the many obstacles cultural researchers had to hurdle to gain access to even just primary materials. This was the period when just to gather primary data was an important task in itself. Basic information about our varied literatures and cultural practices was so scarce that leaving behind the comfort of a library to brave the harsh conditions of field work was almost always inevitable for serious researchers. Sometimes, it would be on a mere hunch or the whiff of a rumor that would lead us to a remote barrio or a house in a small city street, all to flush out a manuscript or a song or a legend. At other times, it would be clues mentioned in a colonial document or uttered by a distant relative or acquaintance that would prod us to cross seas, reach islands, or trek mountains just to get to the site of still unrecorded cultural practices of indigenous cultural communities. Even when field work did not yield what was expected, it never was futile. Other cultural materials could be found along the way, as could insights gained on our people's particular way of seeing and living.

As we continue to explore the rich terrain of Philippine arts and culture, it is sometimes necessary to step back and assess how far we have gone. New contributions to collective knowledge and novel approaches to critical valuations are possible because of past efforts.

This retrospective issue of *Asian Studies* retraces our path to earlier published studies that put us in touch with our cultural past through their explorations of different aspects of our cultural practices and literary traditions.

Anthropologist Eric Casiño opens up for us the world of Jama Mapun in the island of Kagayan, Sulu where “grains, wind, and stars” physically and symbolically interface with the community. His study, “**Jama Mapun**

Ethnoecology: Economic and Symbolic (Of Grains, Wind and Stars)" (1967), which is based on archival data and the field work he and his team did among the Jama Mapun in 1963 and 1966, documents the small shifts and major transformations in the environment, economy, and cultural life of the island community.

The study shows how the conversion alone of a once heavily forested island to a coconut plantation creates a vast transformation on the people's way of living as they convert from a rice planting and multi-cropping system to one in which a single crop is tended to yield cash; as they are introduced to a Western-style education that can possibly change their way of viewing and interpreting the configuration of the stars, which they had done through legends; and as they gain access to the motorized *kumpit* that facilitate easier trading and migration to other islands like Palawan. However, Casiño notes that the natural environment of Kagayan, Sulu, which lies outside the typhoon belt, is rich in volcanic soil, has natural water drainage, and is hospitable and adaptable to the changes that have resulted from the decisions of the island inhabitants. How the Jama Mapun culture has survived through these vicissitudes is a research question that hopefully further studies will address.

Another reprinted study in this issue links us to our past. Transmitted through oral tradition are the countless stories of the often wily yet sometimes foolish Juan Pusong. In "**Juan Pusong: The Filipino Trickster Revisited" (1974)**, Donn V. Hart and Harriet E. Hart go back to the Juan Pusong stories they separately collected from other studies and from informants across the Visayas. They demarcated their research areas and carefully explained how they collected data, some of which were from printed sources and many others from informants, during their separate field work from the 1950s to the mid-1960s. They tested the authenticity of the trickster folk tale by identifying its variants. They catalogued their tales according to theme and representative plots. They point out that some of the Juan Pusong stories were excluded from the collection of other researchers because of the Filipino penchant for excrement humor that may assault Western sensibilities. It is worthwhile noting that the Harts did not have the heart to exclude such stories from their own research work.

Thanks to the research of the Harts, Juan Pusong has been rescued from the margins. Along with his equivalent in Mindanao folklore, *Pilandok*, Juan Pusong's cunning and wit have captured the interest of other scholars, who see in their actions the willful subversion of authority figures who prove to be not as powerful as they appear to be. That Juan Pusong tales continue to be transmitted from generation to generation can be attributed,

perhaps, to the marginalized communities' strong identification with such a figure who makes fools out of rulers with his wit, guile, and often comic interventions.

That our ancient past continues to hold sway over our present medico-religious-cultural system is propounded by historian Zeus A. Salazar in his study, "**Faith Healing in the Philippines: An Historical Perspective**" (1980). Salazar views faith healers as contemporary versions of the *katalonan-babaylan*, who were once central figures in our ancestral communities and were thought to possess healing powers of both spirit and life force. The study is quick to point out, however, that present-day faith healers themselves do not negate the necessary recourse to medical doctors or herbalists for ailments they consider "non-spiritual." Though they live in the shadow, so to speak, of Western medicine, viewing themselves as playing a complementary role to doctors, faith healers have not waned in popularity. For not even centuries of colonial experience and Western education have successfully peeled off from the Filipino psyche the belief and trust in the ability of the faith healer to restore a person's well-being, which can only be ensured if both spirit and life-force within a person are in harmony.

As a historian, Salazar has succeeded in decentralizing history, departing from an approach that considered only major events and personalities and moving an analysis of the "marginal," including the ubiquitous faith healer who has withstood time and is still trusted by many to help them regain their well-being, their *kaginhawaan*.

How theater can so cause a new colonial government to shake in its boots is explored by Paul Rodell in his article "**Philippine Seditious Plays**" (1974). Rodell throws us back to the turn of the twentieth century when the continuing Philippine revolution impassioned Tagalog playwrights to write and stage zarzuelas and symbolic plays to dramatize the country's condition of enslavement and the struggle for freedom. The plays attracted viewers in droves, compelling the American colonial government to declare these as "seditious." Rodell documents not only the strong links the dramatists maintained with revolutionary leaders but also the details of the actual costumes and the sets and scenes that infuriated the Americans, who banned the plays and incarcerated the playwrights. Collectively, the plays constitute what Paul Rodell calls "committed art." Their immense popularity, Rodell opines, comes from their relevance, which is conveyed in indigenized theater forms familiar to the Filipino audience.

The fifth article reprinted in this volume addresses the contentious issue of

the national language. Juan R. Francisco in his study, “**Bhinneka Tunggal Eka: The Development of a National Language in the Philippines,**” (1998) looks into the multilingual situation of the Philippines to account for the problems attendant to the evolving process of establishing a national language in the Philippines. He details the conflict between Tagalog and non-Tagalog ethnolinguistic groups that surfaced when a Tagalog-based national language, Pilipino, was declared in 1935. This is an issue that has yet to be resolved even with the formal development of Filipino as the national language. The conflict, he points out, is not unresolvable when we examine our parallel multicultural and multilingual situation with that of Indonesia. The unity of diverse cultures in a country can be forged by a national language that is not viewed as a threat to the cultural identities embedded in various languages. Thus he posits the Indonesian model, *Bhinneka Tunggal Eka*, as a possible framework for arriving at a national consensus of what our national language, Filipino, should be: a language that is simply our common medium of communication on the national level, but which is not viewed as privileging one language over others. To achieve this, he argues for a more equitable tri-language formula, such as the one proposed by the late linguist Andrew Gonzales, which gives importance to the learning of the Filipino national language as our common language for national communication, the learning of another major Philippine language to address the problem of equity, and the learning of English for our international communication needs.

The model and formula proposed by Juan Francisco is not much different from the University of the Philippines Language Policy approved by the Board of Regents in 1989. A recent development that addresses the problem of equity raised by Francisco is the implementation of the Department of Education Order 74 issued in July 2009 which institutionalizes the mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) from pre-school to Grade 3.

This issue is a kind of a journey to a past that continues to animate our present. It is also an exploration of part of our cultural terrain that has been documented by the five studies reprinted herein. We have certainly developed more critical tools to analyze our culture. As we apply them to our own cultural studies, we are reminded that the very word research means a going back to examine and re-examine, and explore and re-explore materials that are still observable; that may emerge if dug out with the proper tools; and that can be retrieved from the memories of the living. The possibilities are endless when we appreciate that basic research always leave tracks that can lead us deeper into the subject matter or reveal embedded clues that point us to other paths and directions. We also realize

that even with the many other studies that have been conducted about our diverse cultures and ways of seeing, we have really only scratched the surface of what we are as a people.

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End notes

¹ Outside of the article, it may be important to note that other literary forms such as poetry and serialized novels with content the American colonial government would have considered more incendiary, were published and widely disseminated during the same period but escaped the colonizer's attention. Of relevance is also the re-staging of the symbolic plays during the period of Martial Law. Because they were plays resurrected from the past, they were not seen as threats by the unmetaphoric mind of the Marcos dictatorship.