

NATIONAL IDENTITY AND THE PHILIPPINE UNIVERSITY*

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THE TASK OF NATION FORMING AND THE SEARCH FOR THOSE elements to identify a nation or national community is a constructive, thrilling, and exhilarating experience to all participants. It is a task which is a challenge to people either as individuals or groups as they attempt to integrate themselves into a wider community. The problem of national identity is, in effect, the search for those elements which will serve to define their integration into a national community for human and social purposes. It is important to point out that although the Philippines is internationally recognized as an independent state, its citizens are actually still in a process of integrating themselves further into a national community. For if this was not the case, then why all of this talk for the search of national identity? What has just been said might appear as a contradiction; but it is not so in fact. However, it cannot be denied that belonging to a state under the authority of a particular government can provide for an element of national identity. But national identity is much more than this.

You all know that when the Spaniards arrived in the Philippines, what mainly existed in the Archipelago were a group of widely scattered *barangays*; and the facts show that not all of them were maintaining friendly relations with one another. It was only in the sultanates of Sulu, Maguindanao, and Buayan that scores of *barangays* (*banuas*) and even different islands were subjected to a central authority. The Spaniards, in an important sense, were able to integrate the inhabitants of the archipelago and give them an identification of sorts. But it must be emphasized that the natives were identified either as colonial subjects of the Spanish King or ecclesiastical wards of the Church. Admittedly, these two identifying factors in some way transcended that of loyalty to a particular chief, family, *barangay*, or even linguistic or regional group. But the Spanish integration was effected not so much for the well-being of the natives *per se*, but rather for the interests of Spanish colonial and ecclesiastical superiors; interests that were often diametrically opposed to those of the natives. For then, how would you explain

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the numerous revolts against the colonial oppressors? Against this background of colonial exploitation and intellectual, educational, and social stagnation among the natives, some members of the relatively more educated segment of the native population realized that within the colonial and ecclesiastical framework into which they had been thrust, it was difficult if not impossible to attain individual progress and freedom and what they conceived as constituting the social good. Actually they even charged the colonial authorities with having obstructed the attainment of such aspirations. Thus these native leaders were led to conceive of the necessity of forming an alternative community which in effect became the national community. In brief, if the natives of the Philippines were to attain the individual and social good at all, it would have to be done in terms of an identification radically different from those which the Spaniards had originally imposed upon them.

You will all recall that up to the end of the last century, the natives of the Filipinas colony were not called "Filipinos" but "Indios." The Filipinos at that time were the Spanish born in the Philippines. Therefore, it can be used, in an important sense, that Filipinas belonged to the Filipinos but not to the Indios who were born here. The Propaganda Movement and the Philippine Revolution were interrelated movements attempting to transform the Indios into Filipinos such that Filipinos would end up belonging to the native inhabitants of the Philippines. Filipinas was to belong to the natives who were asserted to be the real Filipinos because they were born in it and the land was the land of their ancestors before the coming of the Spaniards. So we can now see that as Filipinos we are a new nation or rather, to be consistent with my thesis, a people still trying to become Filipinos and to make the Philippines really belong to us. The question now is: What is it that makes a Filipino? Is it enough to be a native of the Philippines to be a Filipino or does it require certain specific commitments? What are these commitments? The answer to the above questions is at bottom the same as the answer to the question of what constitutes our national identity.

First of all, we must not assume that the search for national identity ceases the moment a people feel themselves to have constituted a national community. Actually, a dynamic national community keeps on evaluating its elements of identity — eliminating some while adding others in accordance with new needs and expectations in its process of development. A national community that does not evaluate some of its fundamental values has become static and unresponsive to inner needs as well as to external influences. Thus, we should not prescribe that the moment we have enough iden-

tifying elements to consider ourselves a nation that the matter ends there.

The problem at hand is to discover those elements already existing among us and serving to identify us further as Filipinos, as well as those values which we ought to and can adopt in order to make the nation more cohesive. Thus, with your kind indulgence we have to go into a digression that is partially theoretical. I take it that there are at least three principles needed for the analysis of the beginnings and the growth of a national community. The first principle is the consciousness of belonging to a wider group. This consciousness is a matter of degree. It can be vague or highly sophisticated. New or growing nations can be distinguished from older nations by using the above first principle as a criterion. A sense of history here is involved. We can now appreciate better why Rizal worked hard at the British Museum to learn about our past before the coming of the Spaniards in order to search for what he calls "our ancient nationality," which was subsequently lost. Admittedly, some mythology enters into the picture when people write about their ancient days; but then who can deny that a great deal of mythology and fiction is involved in our lives and relations with one another as long as they serve some pragmatic purposes?

The second principle is a commitment to a definite ideology or at least to a basic agreement as to the procedure or technique to arrive at such an ideology. What is happening now in the Philippines is that many groups with particular sectarian ideologies are competing with one another to have elements belonging to their particular ideology be accommodated in that of the national community. Which of these competing ideologies will succeed is left for the future to decide. In a generally democratic society, it is expected that such competition ought to be done by discussion and persuasion. Clearly, discussions, if they are not to reflect bitter economic dissensions but signify differences on how to arrive at the good of all, must be carried on among people among whom there are no gross economic inequalities. Incidentally, adherence to democratic procedure by all competing groups in a society, in an important manner, provides for an element of identity among a group of people.

Related to the second principle is the third one which is the general belief that the formation or existence of a national community brings about the enjoyment of what is conceived to constitute the individual and social good. This principle involves the nature of commitment either to the idea of having a national community or to the fact of a nation; for why should people work to bring about or work for something if they will not get anything out of it. Indeed, it is when people feel that some of their deeply felt aspirations will be satisfied in a community that they will effectively participate in

its formation and be willing to undergo sacrifices for it. This third principle is important for it was precisely because it was felt by the generality of the natives of the Philippines that they were not getting much out of the Spanish or enough of the American colonial system that they began to think of another system. However, as Rizal pointed out, if the new system would be just like the old one, then nothing much in terms of human development and the social good would be attainable.

My conclusion from all the above is that as a starting point in the development of our national community we already have some prescriptive elements, and the nature of these has to do with the thinking of our revolutionary fathers. Their messages are still cogent. We need a system where the freedom of the individual as well as his intrinsic value is asserted and where the social conditions for the development of his talents are provided for. Moreover, in this social condition, there is supposed to be a complete absence of exploitation, of any form of humiliation, of overwhelming self-esteem, and of tyranny. All work for the benefit of all, in the spirit of consideration, love, discipline, and sacrifice. The member of the community has learned to emancipate himself from his personal and even family interests for those of the whole society. Our revolutionary fathers believed that the existence of a national community they were fighting to bring about was to constitute essentially a system of moral relations.

At this point, another question can be raised: Why then did our revolutionary fathers not immediately conceive of a universal community based on the individual's sense of humanity instead of one that was national in character? Why did they have to speak initially of a nation? The answer is due to the historical stage in which our revolutionary fathers found themselves; nations were fighting one another or exploiting each other or competing with each other to have more colonies. Classes were fighting each other for social supremacy and dynasties tyrannized the bulk of the population. Our revolutionary fathers therefore deemed it necessary that the natives should belong to a nation different from other nations and that theirs should be strong enough to resist the exploitative tendencies of other nations. They must be Filipinos first before they could fight for their rights *qua* human beings. After all, the other nations *vis-a-vis* each other were not thinking of the human condition or moral considerations; they were strengthening themselves as nations in order to **take** advantage of others. In brief, if other nations were to think in terms of moral relations they would not have come as colonizers or exploiters. This does not mean that our revolutionary fathers did not anticipate that the march of mankind was eventually towards a **greater** sense of humanity and that nationalism would ultimately

become a thing of the past. The message here is clear: nationalism is, at best, a tool for human and social ends. It is not an end in itself.

Historically speaking, individuals and groups have played their part in delineating principles to guide the national community. Such individuals are those with great vision and statesmanship. They are usually called the fathers of a nation. Groups, reflecting the vague aspirations of the people but able to articulate them better, have also played their part in adding to the elements of national identity. But more than this; individuals, like groups, can be creative by pointing out new directions to a national community. The University of the Philippines not only as a state university but as a community of scholars can play a similar creative role. By means of academic excellence, intellectual leadership, the will to work for a common good, as well as with the parallel development of a more effective communication between its academicians (both faculty and students) with the masses of people, universities can play a dramatic and creative role. By virtue of its advantages in the development of skills as well as a grasp of the subject matter of the different divisions of human thought, an academic community can be more sensitive to the nature of increasing government needs and social demands and be in a better position to set forth certain directions that will make the national community more cohesive, more responsive to the demands of modernization and technical progress, and a culturally richer one. Scholars, too, are in the best position to study the different cultural elements among our diverse peoples to discover principles worth adopting by all—thus letting our sub-cultures play an important role in nation-building. By means of persuasion in an atmosphere of freedom, an academic community can not but generate expectations among the people, even along constructive ideological lines. In any case, any professor or student by developing himself along lines of academic excellence tends to increase the educational level of society. Therefore he helps society to determine what aims it ought to pursue as well as to discover the means for attaining them. That is why academic freedom and free speech must be cherished possessions in all academic communities. If this were not the case, then society would lose an opportunity to profit from its potentially more brilliant segment. We should not fear discussions, criticisms, and more ideas, whatever may be the manner in which they may appear; for it is out of conflicting opinions that the best ones might prevail for the benefit of all. However, all ideas, if they are not to bring about contrary or negative results, must be accepted on a voluntary basis. Allow me to say that I do not believe that there is an idea that is so eminently good that it ought to be imposed.

On account of our history, geographical situation, and international relations, it is suggested that the further search for elements

for our national identity might consider, among others, the following principles: a deeper study of the work of our revolutionary fathers and the agrarian basis of the popular support of the Philippine Revolution; the need for an accelerated integration of our different cultural groups, both the majority and minority groups, by an emphasis on a common cultural matrix as well as a selection of the best values from our sub-cultures to be adopted by all within the context of a pluralistic society; the elimination of all vestiges of colonialism and imperialism in our social life and the development of new attitudes among the people regarding other nations; the recapture of cultural ties with our Asian neighbors from which we had been separated from by means of a deliberate colonial policy; the search for a more equitable economic system that will avoid any form of exploitation between groups in our society; more scientific development and the adoption of the techniques for modernization as well as the strengthening of our economic base not only to raise the standard of living but also to prevent other nations from exploiting our country; the development of our national language to further our sense of unity and experiments in having new thought forms to bring about more knowledge; the development of literature and the arts to enable our emerging culture to become a truly creative one and make our lives more adventuresome in the world of ideas and feeling; and the search of moral principles to moderate conflicts among ourselves, enabling us to develop the virtues of discipline and work for the good of all. It is not naive to assume this early that in a future world culture, elements of a new and vigorous Filipino culture will be incorporated. This was a hope of some of our revolutionary fathers. This is a responsibility you are all expected to bear. THANK YOU.