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Notes on the Third National Folklore Congress

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Notes and Comments

Notes on the Third National Folklore Congress*

TERESITA GIMENEZ-MACEDA

*Ang di marunong lumingon sa pinanggalingan
di makararating sa paroroonan.*

A nation's progress must be rooted in the cultural traditions of its people. In a country like the Philippines that has had centuries of colonial experience, it is not surprising to discover that the step toward national development begins first with a step backwards to the past, with a search for cultural roots that are preserved in the folklore of our diverse cultural groups.

In the past years, scholars have been collecting, recording, and analyzing these folk traditions. But foreigners have pioneered in this endeavor. Only a few of our scholars deemed it worthwhile to do fieldwork, to document and collect the traditions of our cultural groups. Many have put efforts to the less taxing but nevertheless important written literatures in the various vernaculars. Today as the country moves forward, and modernization is slowly creeping into our more traditional societies in the form of transistor radios and other media, we find our folk traditions facing the fate of possible extinction. Thus, more serious folklorists like Dr. E. Arsenio Manuel have sounded the urgent need for more scholars to take interest in folklore research.

Of the folklore collections already gathered, few have found their way into school texts. The rest are read and shared by co-folklorists in the scholarly journals that publish them. Very little attempt has been made to disseminate these to the people. Folklorists, however, are aware that the situation cannot continue

*Held 26-30 November 1976, at the University of San Carlos, Cebu City.

if there is to be any meaning in their efforts. They realize they must work together with others in the education field to increase the Filipino's awareness of the richness of his culture. Thus the Third National Folklore Congress, whose main thrust was to define the role folklore plays in national development.

The congress was an assemblage not strictly of folklore scholars alone but of other representatives from various universities and colleges all over the country. Its very liberal invitation to anyone interested in attending the congress indicated that the organizer, the Philippine Folklore Society, was not interested in the exchange of research notes among its members, but more importantly, in serious deliberation on the concrete ways folklore can help in national development, and in interesting a larger number of students and professors in folklore research. The 16 papers read in the congress stressed what in Dr. Damiana Eugenio's words was the need "to look back and discover what in our cultural past we can use to advantage in achieving our national goals" ("Proverbs for National Understanding," p. 1).

The first three papers read provided the working framework for the congress. Father Francisco Demetrio in his "An Overview of the Various Schools of Folkloristics and their Methodologies" discussed the concept of what folklore is, how various methodologies for its interpretation have been evolved by scholars over the years. He emphasized that analyzing folklore is a science in itself, is a discipline.

Dr. E. Arsenio Manuel narrowed the study of folklore down to the Philippine experience. In his paper "Philippinensian Oral Traditions: Theory and Practice," he concretized the problems faced by folklorists in this country. The more urgent task is the collection and documentation of oral traditions in all parts of the country. Unlike Demetrio's formalistic approach, Manuel emphasized the study of oral traditions in their sociocultural context in order to understand their true function. To preserve the collections, there is a need to establish a national folklore archive and folklore centers in various regions.

In the third paper, "Change and Folklore," Professor Juan R. Francisco dealt with the more practical problem of what to do with folklore — myths, beliefs — in a changing society. In traditional societies which must inevitably be modernized, a casting away of the folk beliefs and myths may create irreparable psycho-

logical damage to the people who have lived by these for centuries. It is necessary and judicious therefore that the agents of change in these societies understand deeply the culture of the people in which these changes must occur, before introducing any change.

This confrontation between traditional folkways and change is most clearly dramatized in the experience of the Kalingas. Dr. William Henry Scott in his "Old Folkways, New Societies" bared the sad plight of the proud Kalingas who have retained their traditions and culture by resisting colonization but who today face the danger of dislocation, possibly extinction, because of the government project in the Chico River.

Demetrio, Manuel, and Francisco having set the tone for the conference, other scholars shared with the congress participants their own research into the richness of the folklore of our various communities.

The folk game *duplo*, "an extemporaneous debate in verse held traditionally during the last rites for the dead" ("Duplo: Verse, Debate and Performance," p. 3) as presented by Professor Vivencio Jose, illustrates the folk wit and metaphorical language of the Filipino. Professor Nagasura Madale analyzed the myth surrounding the sarimanok, its links with other ASEAN bird motifs, and its possible use as the Philippine national symbol. Father Joseph Goertz and Professor Resil B. Mojares looked into the educative use of folktales in the classroom. Dr. Elena Maquiso shared her research into the "*Ulahingan Epic* of the Livunganene Arumanen Manobos," giving insights into Manobo society and culture. Two papers, one by Dr. Francis Madigan and Professor Zenaida Uy-Rebolos which described certain Misamis Oriental agricultural rituals and how these operate in the folk lives, another by Dr. Marcelino Foronda, Jr., which described an Ilocano exorcist ritual, *Nakagaw-at*, in the Ilocos town of Subadi, show how, despite modernization, folkways continue to assert themselves in the lives of ordinary people. Leyte-Samar folk poetry was briefly discussed by Mrs. Adelaida Filamor. This was followed by an interesting account of "Demonology and its Development" by Dr. Maximo Ramos. In her paper "Proverbs for National Understanding," Dr. Damiana Eugenio pointed to what Philippine proverbs taken in their totality revealed of the Filipino — "his attitude toward life, his notions of justice, the virtues he extols and the vices he condemns, and the system of values emerging from them his

observation about life and human nature" (p. 2). Dr. Ernesto Constantino's "Philippine Oral Literature and its Contribution to Cultural Development in the Philippines: A Prognosis" was a criticism of how damaging our colonial bias for written literature has been for our oral traditions. He pointed to "the richness, the variety and high artistic development of the oral literatures of the Filipinos" (p. 14), which are, to his mind, the more accurate representation of the Filipino mind. If the Filipinos are therefore to seek cultural advancement and unification, it is to these traditions that they must turn.

As the concluding paper, Bayani de Leon's "The Folk Element in Philippine Music Towards the Shaping of National Consciousness" concretized how folk traditions can be used for cultural advancement. He showed how Filipino musicians derived from the wellsprings of folk music the themes for many of their classical compositions.

Indeed, advancement must have its roots in the cultural past, for it is this past that is the soul of a people.

The reading of three conference papers per session was usually followed by six panelists' response to the papers. The panelist's role, however, was not clearly defined by the organizers. Instead of providing directions for the conference participants by pointing out the significant insights and important information to be gathered from the papers delivered, and evaluating the papers in the light of the theme of the conference, the panelists, because of lack of guidelines, resorted to asking insignificant questions that oftentimes were mere requests for explanations or disagreement over certain terms used in the paper. There was hardly any time left for an open forum, which was deemed by participants to be important, because it was precisely here they could engage others in exchange of ideas.

For a four-day conference, a total of 16 papers with additional reporting of ongoing research projects seemed to be too many. A more discriminate selection of papers could have given time for the holding of workshops or smaller discussion groups where participants could have discussed what concrete steps to take toward (a) increasing the awareness of our studentry and educators on the richness of our folklore, thereby interesting them in doing research in other areas; (b) making available folklore collections to a wider audience; (c) agitating for the government to take serious interest

in providing centers that will archive our traditions and to sponsor and fund research into cultures fast giving way to modernization. In other words, workshops that will make feasible the theme of the congress.

The Third National Folklore Congress, however, was an achievement in itself, for in gathering outstanding folklorists as well as representatives from other academic sectors, and in the reading of the conference papers, it asserted the value of taking pride in one's heritage, the conviction that a shaping of a national consciousness will rise out of the study of our diverse cultural groups in the country, that the past is relevant, that folklore has a great contribution to make in our national endeavors for development and progress.