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History and Philippine Culture

H. De La Costa

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perience. Meditation for once was easy. After seven or eight minutes, a *Pater, Ave* and *Gloria* were recited in Latin, and a hymn was sung by the choir. The priests then chanted in turn another section of the passion narrative, paused, and priests and people again knelt in silent meditation. The procedure was repeated four or five times until the gospel's account of the events in Gethsemane had been chanted and meditated upon in its entirety.

That was all. It was very simple, yet it would be hard to conceive a more suitable way of responding to our Lord's heart-broken plea, "Could you not watch one hour with Me?" The thousands of us present in Gethsemane that night did "watch and pray one hour" with Him, there under the olive trees in the light of the paschal moon.

It may be true, as Saint Gregory of Nyssa insists, that change of place does not bring God nearer. Yet it is also true, as Paula well knew, that it is an enviable privilege to be able "to worship there where the feet of the Lord have stood and see as if still fresh the traces of His Cross and Passion."

J. J. KAVANAGH

History and Philippine Culture'

This paper will be devoted to a discussion of the following questions: (1) What does history tell us about our national culture? (2) Can history tell us anything more about it? (3) What must we do to extract this additional information?

I

The present unsatisfactory state of historical studies among us is one of the reasons why we cannot define our national culture as clearly and accurately as we would wish. Our knowledge of our past can only be described as spotty. About certain periods and aspects of it we know a great deal; about other periods and aspects hardly anything. We have pushed our researches into the minutest details of Rizal's life to almost incredible lengths; but so decisive a development in our economic and social history as the Tobacco

¹ Paper read at a Symposium on Philippine Culture jointly sponsored by the UNESCO National Commission of the Philippines and the Rizal Centennial Commission, February 1961.

Monopoly remains, as far as our understanding of it is concerned, where the last Spanish publicists of the nineteenth century left it. And so throughout: between small clearings of intensive cultivation, swarming with thesis writers and Sunday-magazine essayists, lie large tracts of almost pathless jungle, where (to adopt a well known Malapropism) the eye of the historian has never set foot.

Still we do know enough, at least about the grand lines of our historical development, to venture certain very broad generalizations about our national culture. First, it is quite obvious that our culture is made up of many elements of widely different provenance. Archaeological remains, linguistic analysis and the findings of anthropologists confirm the indications in our meager documentation that the earliest peoples of these islands were considerably influenced by the cultures of the Hinduized empires of Southeast Asia and their Muslim successor states. The Spanish influence is of course plain for all to see, in our religion, our legal system, our social institutions, our literature, art and music. Of the Anglo-Saxon influence we need merely note that we are conducting this symposium in English and would probably be in considerable difficulties if we tried to conduct it in any other language. As the medium of instruction in our schools and the ordinary language of social intercourse for over half a century, English has been the vehicle of ideas distinctive of the culture of the English-speaking peoples, not the least important of which are those ideas of democratic government which we have incorporated into the Constitution of our Republic.

Our national culture, then, did not develop, as did the culture of the Chinese, in isolation, by the cultivation and elaboration of resources for the most part autochthonous. Rather, the original capital with which we began kept being added to from many sources outside our borders, from far and near, from Europe as well as Asia. In this, our experience is roughly analogous to that of other seagirt peoples similarly located, such as the ancient Greeks and, in more recent times, the British.

Here, then, is the first broad generalization we can make about our culture on the basis of our history as we know it. The second is this: that our cultural borrowings from abroad did not long remain in their original state among us. They were not merely deposited one on top of the other like successive layers of sediment, each remaining perfectly distinct from and unaffected by the others. To put it quite simply, these intrusive cultures did not only do something to us, we did something to them. We assimilated them, changing, as all living beings do, what were originally foreign substances into our own. Admittedly, the rate and degree of assimilation varied considerably, but that assimilation took place cannot be questioned.

To take one example. The history of art is still in its infancy in this country; yet even the small amount of research that has been done in this vast field is sufficient to indicate that the Spanish architecture of our colonial churches is Spanish only in its initial inspiration. The Spanish missionaries who planned and directed the construction of these churches had perforce to employ Chinese or native artisans, and these nameless craftsmen infused into what they built something of their own, whether it be a structural line, or a decorative motif, or a more intangible style pervading the whole. The result was something which is not quite Spanish, nor quite Chinese, nor quite Southeast-Asian, but an integration at varying levels of all three styles which can only be called Filipino.

Again, what could be more Filipino than the *kundiman*? Yet musicologists tell us that if by "Filipino" you mean strictly indigenous, then the *kundiman* can hardly be called such because of the strong Spanish elements which it contains. Yet it is obviously not Spanish either. What then shall we call it? It is either Filipino or it is nothing. And so with other products of our national culture: the *corrido*, the *moro-moro*, the town *fiesta* and other manifestations of folk Catholicism, the novels of Rizal as well as the short stories of our contemporary writers in English; they are clearly derivative, but — equally clearly — they are not merely such. A vital and vigorous culture, our own, has taken what was in the beginning a foreign form or model and transformed it into something quite different; something not found elsewhere; something, in short, Filipino. We are thus led to the conclusion that while our national culture has developed by the addition of foreign elements, this has not been a process of mere accretion, but one of intussusception, of assimilation into a living organism with a form and spirit of its own.

A third generalization is in order. The piece-meal process by which these islands were peopled, the varying patterns of our trade with neighboring lands, and the greater or less degree of penetration effected by the Spanish and American colonial system — all these aspects of our history suggest that while it is possible to speak of a national culture common to the Philippines as a whole, we must expect significant horizontal and vertical variations. This historical hint is confirmed by the contemporary studies of sociologists and anthropologists, who are beginning to spell out for us the concrete differences between highland and lowland culture, between the kinship and value systems of urban and rural communities, between the way a member of the Quezon City Lions' Club and the way a tenant farmer of Barrio Gacao, Leyte, sizes up the universe.

Thus, an examination of the broad lines of our historical development, as we know it today, suggests three generalizations: first, that from the very earliest times to the present these islands have

been subjected to an almost continual stream of cultural influences from without; secondly, that Filipinos reacted to these influences not by rejecting them or simply imitating them but by assimilating them, more or less successfully, into their cultural heritage; thirdly, that this process of acculturation varied horizontally, from region to region, and vertically, from class to class, resulting in significant differences within a recognizably common culture. If these generalizations are sound, a number of important practical conclusions follow. One is that our national culture is vastly more complex than would appear at first glance. It is complex not only because of the multiplicity of its components, not only because of the diversity of origin of these components, but also because of the variety and delicacy of their articulation with each other and with the whole.

Once this complexity is appreciated, it will readily be realized that to attempt to distinguish what is indigenous from what is foreign in our culture is an extremely risky undertaking. For, as we have seen, there is hardly any aspect of it that has not been stimulated or modified or affected in some way by external factors; looked at from this angle, it would be almost true to say that our national culture is a wholly foreign culture. On the other hand, there is hardly any external factor impinging on our culture which we have not colored by our attitudes and shaped to our purposes; and in this sense, it would be perfectly true to say that there is nothing foreign about our culture. How then can we hope to sort out elements so inextricably intertwined into such oversimplified categories as "foreign" and "indigenous"?

But not only is the undertaking risky, it is also pointless. For if our aim is to arrive at a definition of what Filipino culture is, it is certainly not by such a process of selection that we shall arrive at it. The basic confusion here is to make "national" synonymous with "indigenous". Nothing could be more arbitrary. For our national culture is not what we had in the beginning, it is what we have today. And what we have today is not only what we had to begin with, it is also what we have made our own. It is this totality and only this totality, with all its diversity of parts and complexity of structure, that we have any right to call the culture of the Filipinos.

II

This is about as much as history in its present state of development among us can tell us about our culture. Can it tell us anything more? Undoubtedly it can, but only if we clear away certain misconceptions and take certain positive measures.

In the first place, we must get rid of the idea that the task which faces the historian today is merely a task of reinterpretation—

of interpreting correctly what his predecessors interpreted wrongly. It is sometimes said that the trouble with Philippine history is that it was written first by foreigners — Spaniards or Americans — and then by Filipinos who adopted uncritically their foreign point of view. To use a term which Professor Tregonning of the University of Malaya applies to the history of his own region, Philippine history is almost exclusively "Europocentric", and this is what is wrong with it. It ought to be "Filipino-centric", and the present job of the Filipino historian is to make it so; to reinterpret it from the Filipino point of view rather than from the Spanish or the American.

There is a great deal to be said for this opinion. It assumes, however, that the materials are there to be interpreted; that all or most of the evidence relevant to the main phases of our historical development has been submitted, and that it is now merely a question of revising the construction that has been placed upon the evidence. I do not believe this is correct. It seems to me that on many important events and features of our history the usable evidence is woefully fragmentary and incomplete. Let me stress the term "usable". It is not that the evidence is non-existent. It exists, in large quantities and multiple form, in archives both here and abroad, and even in published works of every description. But it simply has not been gathered and pieced together in such a way as to be *usable* evidence, capable of being studied in its entirety and thus provide a solid basis for accounts that shall be factual and not merely conjectural.

I mentioned earlier in this paper one outstanding example of this from our economic history: the Tobacco Monopoly. Here is an institution whose influence not only on our economic but also on our social and political development can hardly be exaggerated. It is therefore of the highest importance that we should have an objective and impartial account of it. We may have reason to suspect that the earlier accounts of this institution were hispanocentric (which would not be surprising, seeing they were written by Spanish historians), and that, being hispanocentric, they either disregard altogether or do less than justice to certain aspects of our cultural development which are of supreme interest to us as Filipinos. We must therefore "reinterpret" the history of the Tobacco Monopoly; but how? We cannot do so simply on the basis of the evidence adduced in the hispanocentric histories, for if our assumption of bias is correct, this evidence has been selected to support a hispanocentric thesis. What we must do is to find out whether any additional evidence exists which will warrant a revision of that thesis. In other words, we cannot reinterpret our history without enlarging its factual base. Revision cannot begin with revision; it must begin with research.

Thus, a Filipino who wishes to write on the history of his country, but is unable or unwilling to do basic research in the sources, has really only two alternatives open to him. He can simply summarize or paraphrase or render in English what the earlier Spanish histories contain; in which case he will be perpetuating the europocentric view with which there is such widespread dissatisfaction today. Or else he can react against this europocentrism and attempt to rewrite our history from a Filipino point of view; in which case he will soon discover that much of what he writes is pure conjecture, since he does not possess the factual material with which to document what he wishes to say, or what can be said, about Filipino culture. Let me repeat that this is not because this material does not exist. It does. But we must not expect it to be handed to us on a silver platter. We must go out and get it. We must do research.

Another mistake which we ought to avoid is limiting the area of our historical interest and the scope of our investigations for reasons which are largely emotional or simply irrelevant. It has been suggested, for instance, that our national history ought to begin in the middle of the nineteenth century, because that is when we begin to have a national consciousness and hence when we begin to be a nation. Consequently, we need not concern ourselves with what happened to Filipinos, or what Filipinos did, before that period. It is also alleged in support of this view that the history of these islands prior to the birth of the nationalist movement is not really the history of the Philippines but the history of Spain or the Spanish Empire, that is to say, the history of the handful of Spanish officials, colonists and clergymen who managed to impose their dominion here and to retain it for a matter of three centuries. Now, their doings may possibly be of absorbing interest to a Spanish historian, but what possible claim can they have to the attention of the Filipino historian?

It seems to me that this view does more honor to the sturdy nationalism of its proponents than it does to their understanding of the nature of the historical process. Even if we were to concede that the history of the Philippines begins, or ought to begin, when the Philippines begins to be a nation, it should be obvious that we cannot even begin to understand the Philippines as a nation unless we first understand it as a colony. The first question we have to ask about the Revolution is why there should have been a Revolution in the first place; and that is a question we cannot answer without a pretty thorough grasp of the entire span of our Spanish colonial history. And surely it is oversimplifying matters considerably to say that the history of our Spanish period is merely the history of the Spaniards who lived in the Philippines during that

period. That may be the hispanocentric way of looking at it, which many feel today to be no longer adequate, if it ever was; but it is surely a curious way of remedying the inadequacy by simply ignoring the period altogether.

The fact is that much of what happened during the Revolution, and much of what is happening even today, cannot be completely understood without reference to our past, and often to our remote past. The roots that maintain a peculiarly stubborn sort of life in many of our distinctively Philippine social institutions go very far back indeed. If then we want history to make its proper contribution to the understanding of our culture, we must set no arbitrary limits to the range of historical research, but permit the historian to wander happily about the large and very untidy lumber room which is his peculiar domain.

Lastly, it is important that we ask the historian questions; but we must not tell him what answers to give. We must permit him to answer for himself, insisting only that he support his answer with evidence. An epigram which has been given currency lately here is one of Benedetto Croce's to the effect that "all history is contemporary history." I suppose this means that every generation interprets history according to its own attitudes and needs. Taken in this sense, simply as the statement of a fact, it is true enough. But if it is taken as an insight into the nature of history; if it is implied that historical truth changes from one generation to another, and that each generation makes its own historical truth, then I do not think the statement makes any sense. Historical interpretation may vary from one generation to another, but the very notion of interpretation implies that there is something there to interpret, some irreducible substratum of fact which is capable of being variously understood but which itself remains invariable.

In short, history has indeed something to say to us, but we must not expect it to say what we please. It has a truth of its own which is objective and extramental. We cannot invent this truth; we must discover it.

III

This brings us to our third and last question: What must we do to extract from our history the additional information that we need for a greater understanding of our national culture? Our answer to this question can be direct and brief, because it follows logically from our answer to the previous question. What must we do? Those of us who are historians must do research; they must do research into the entire range of our historic past; and they must do this research in an objective and dispassionate spirit, not reading

answers into the record but deriving answers from it. Those of us who are not historians but who are interested in having historians do their job should provide them with the tools to do it.

Any number of concrete proposals could be made, but it does not seem necessary to include them in this paper. On the occasion of the Ateneo de Manila's centennial celebration two years ago a committee of historians made several such proposals; they may be consulted in the *ATENEO CENTENNIAL REPORT*. Others will probably be advanced in the discussions of this symposium.

I may be permitted to end this paper with two examples of the kind of organized effort which will certainly be required if the study of history in this country is to rise to the demands which are being made of it. The first is from the historiography of Europe, the second from that of China.

Towards the middle of the nineteenth century, nationalism was at the flood in Europe just as it is today in Asia. In the field of historical studies it resulted in the kind of national history — boastful, rhetorical, jingoistic, irresponsible — which is not unknown among us and which is bringing the noble sentiment of nationalism into disrepute. Such books are today forgotten, and are best forgotten. But it had another effect also. It inspired individual scholars and societies of scholars to undertake, with the cordial cooperation of governments and public-spirited citizens, the slow, patient, infinitely laborious work of publishing the authentic historical records of their respective countries. And as, over the years, these superbly edited volumes followed each other in stately succession, it became abundantly clear that there can be no more enduring tribute to the greatness of a people, no stronger stimulus to enlightened patriotism, no better basis for international understanding than to present without exaggeration or diminution, in all their lights and shadows, heights and depths, the very sources of a nation's culture.

About 90 B.C. the illustrious Chinese historian Ssu-ma Ch'ien completed his meticulous account of the Han Dynasty and began a tradition of official historiography which the Chinese people maintained unbroken for well nigh two thousand years. The tradition was that each dynasty upon its accession to the imperial throne appointed a historical commission and charged it with the task of writing the history of the preceding dynasty from the documents carefully preserved in the state archives. As each dynastic history was completed, it was published along with its predecessors. Today, the Twenty-Four Dynastic Histories of China — some 900 volumes in a modern edition — constitute a monument to a great culture and to a great tradition of scholarship unequalled anywhere else in the world.

These two examples of how nationalism can promote the study of history, and history serve the highest purposes of nationalism, will doubtless suggest what we ourselves may attempt in order to preserve, to enrich, and above all to understand our own cultural heritage.

H. DE LA COSTA

The Bible As A Source And Inspiration Of Literature

Those who are seriously concerned with the development of literature in the Philippines are amply justified in urging our authors and would-be authors to exploit the rich resources of our past, whether Spanish or pre-Spanish. This is one appeal to tradition; there is another which is the subject of this note.

I should like to suggest serious consideration of the Bible as a most fertile source of literary themes, and, for those who believe in its sacred character, a never ceasing inspiration for the contemplation of those great problems which have always been a major preoccupation of mankind.

It is superfluous to recall how frequent biblical themes and allusions are in the major European writers; in Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Dante. In fact, if all trace of the Sacred Scriptures were removed from the literature of the West, that literature would be poor indeed. This is not to say that historically, the best of European letters has been nourished, whether directly or indirectly, whether consciously or unconsciously, by the Bible. The problem of good and evil, the problem of God and man, the problem of love at its highest and vice at its lowest, these are problems that confront the writer wherever he is; but the European writer's approach to them, whether he likes it or not, whether he is conscious of it or not, is conditioned to a large extent by the great books of the Christian faith.

The Old Testament, for all its roughness and even crudity, has no equal in literature as a mine of plots and situations which have been, and may still be, exploited to the full. And Filipino writers have a distinct advantage in this regard, owing to the close similarity between the Philippines and ancient Israel. Both countries suffered for centuries the burdens and humiliations of being a subject people. Because of this, both peoples have developed a strong sense of depend-