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The “First National Philippine Studies Conference”: 11-13 February 1958

Florentino H. Hornedo

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**The "First National Philippine Studies Conference":
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FLORENTINO H. HORNEDO

Sometime in the first quarter of 1984, meetings called for the purpose of organizing what was then called the Philippine Studies Association of the Philippines (PSAP) were held at the University of the Philippines in Diliman, Quezon City. Most of the participants had had experience in Philippine studies, and some of them had been to the First International Philippine Studies Conference in 1980 in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and the second in Honolulu in 1981. Three things eventually came up as the key business of the group: (1) organization, (2) incorporation, and (3) planning the First National Philippine Studies Conference.

By mid-year, as the constitution and by-laws of the association took shape, and as the first set of officers—Profs. Ofelia R. Angangco of the University of the Philippines, Doreen G. Fernandez (ADMU), Elsa P. Jurado (UP), and Milagros Guerrero (UP)—got down to the specific work of organizing a national conference, the name was changed to Philippine Studies Association, Incorporated (PSAI). It was by then definite that the First National Philippine Studies Conference would be held in February 1985.

Two problems bothered the PSAI charter members who also became the members of the steering committee and headed many of the sub-committees for the preparation of the conference: Would there be enough scholars interested in participating in the conference and presenting papers? Where would the funds come from?

By the third quarter it was clear that there were a number of other conferences of more or less national scope and along topics related to or classifiable as Philippine studies. The Philosophical Association of the Philippines (PAP) was holding its annual

symposium-seminar in Baguio on 26-28 October 1984. The theme was "Philosophy in Crisis Situations." The Fifth National Folklore Congress (held by the Philippine Folklore Society every four years) was to be held at San Carlos University in Cebu City on 9-11 November 1984. Its theme: "Folklore as Social Criticism." The Philippine Historical Society and the National Conference on Local History were holding a joint "Sixth National Conference on Local-National History" with "Philippine Economic History" as the theme. The venue was the Philippine Social Science Center (PSSC) in Diliman, Quezon City, on 11-14 December 1984. The National Research Council of the Philippines (NRCP) Division of Humanities was having its Third Annual Symposium in Makiling on December 7, on the theme "The Humanities in Time of Crisis." And Philippine PEN was having its annual conference in Manila on writers in a time of crisis, on December 8.

A look at the scholars who were indicating their interest and commitment to participate in many of the other national conferences showed that the same people were taking part in most of the conferences. But as the last quarter of the year came and all the conferences had come and gone, it was obvious that scholars were doing their homework and were eager to present their research findings in the various national fora.

Because of constraints of financing as well as a desire to bring the congress discussion to a higher level of theory and interpretation in folkloristics, the Folklore congress in Cebu was deliberately limited to fewer participants. The conference on national-local economic history, however, was open. Two major factors favored the conference: comparatively generous funding, and a fresh field of focus: Philippine economic history. By conference's end, about 300 Philippine studies scholars and enthusiasts had shown up to listen to about a hundred papers delivered in over twenty sessions. Measuring the accomplishment against the best expectations of the members of the steering committee headed by Dean Dr. Leslie Bauzon of the University of the Philippines College of Social Sciences and Philosophy, it was a triumph. The publication process has also started, and it is expected that the best papers in that conference will be in print soon.

The advantages of the national history conference were absent from the projected Philippine studies national conference. By 31 December 1984, a large number of scholars had indicated their

participation, had sent in the titles of papers, but only a few had sent in abstracts. Program chairperson Dr. Doreen G. Fernandez (Ateneo de Manila) had grouped the titles topically and the sessions were shaping up. On the whole, however, the steering committee had much to worry about: there were no funds to help the delegates from the provincial areas come to Manila, and a large number of them had indicated their interest in participating. Their schools were not willing or were unable to help them defray transportation expenses. (In the national-local history conference, over 40 percent of the participants had been from the provincial areas—a phenomenon in itself.) A particular problem for the Committee on Ways and Means was the presence in the program of topics that one funding institution thought unacceptable for funding. A potential benefactor of the conference had singled out the session on “Liberation Theology” as specifically offending, but in the interest of inquiry into “Concerns and Directions in Philippine Studies,” the conference theme, all agreed that the session was important.

By the last general meeting of the steering committee on 24 January 1985, barely two weeks before the conference, modest funding was available for the barest necessities of the Conference. There would be no frills. If it was going to succeed, it was going to be a victory of the human spirit, a “conference on a Third World budget,” as the organizers put it.

When the conference finally took place, some 128 papers were presented in the 23 sessions and a round table discussion, and by the second day 303 participants had registered (which included some graduate and undergraduate students who came only for selected sessions). It also became obvious that the absence of “frills” was helping the sessions by saving much needed time for interaction during the open forums. Aside from sessions on literature, language, history, education, and various aspects of the social sciences, there were panels on cross-cultural interaction, culture change, popular culture, law, philosophy, women’s studies, and national identity.

The conference format was not entirely satisfactory to some participants because of the simultaneity of sessions in which papers of interest to individual participants were being read. Reproduction of the papers could have helped to place all the lectures in everybody’s hands, but that was not possible both because

of the lack of funds, and because a great number of the papers read had not been submitted ahead of time to the secretariat.

Plenary sessions had been planned at one point during the preparations but this was abandoned when it became clear that there were too many papers to be read in too short a time. The "sessions" format of most international conferences was adopted as the best under the circumstances.

Easily noticeable features of the Philippine studies conference were the great number of participants, the variety of the content of *Philippine studies* (from culinary culture to visions of a just society), the increased presence of native Filipino scholars in proportion to foreign scholars doing Philippine studies, the increased number of young unpublished scholars in proportion to the older ones, the burgeoning research in fields not usually represented in other conferences and the growing sense of Philippine studies as a quasi-discipline, or a good example of interdisciplinary interaction.

In his welcoming remarks, UP Dean Dr. Pablo Botor noted some areas not touched by the conference papers (e.g. music, Filipino humor, etc.). The suggestion was well taken: future conferences can certainly cover such areas. Ethnomusicologists are rare in the Philippines, but there are now two at the UP College of Music; and a paper on political jokes was read at the folklore congress in Cebu.

A bit disturbing, if this writer understood it right, was the proposition of UP President Edgardo J. Angara regarding the job of the scholar as pure description of the truth, his suggestion that the academic has no business trying to win others to his own values. Suppose, as it was said, that the Filipino people—the scholars among them—limited themselves to discovering the truth, period. If the truth is that the people are exploited and oppressed, what then? Do they merely try to discover how to make their chains more comfortable instead of taking action together to cast them off?

The sessions and the interactions which took place in them indicate a healthy growth of awareness and concern for content and methodology. The conference appears to have made what were probably non-deliberate but nonetheless real statements regarding *Philippine studies*: *Philippine studies* should be done by Filipinos from a Filipino sensibility and perspective. There was a recurrent

castigation of "Western methods" which appear on the whole to have been associated with positivist parameters of truth, as against a native hermeneutics. The problem came to a momentary but indubitable point of dramatization when, at the roundtable discussion on "Visions of a Just Society" at the UP Faculty Center, a foreign scholar stood up, and said, sincerely I think, that in spite of what everyone was calling a crisis of the country and its leadership, the Philippines had come a long way, rather positively. A vociferous exchange of opinions followed in which one of the panelists said curtly that the gentleman sounded like "one of those government propaganda press releases." Someone put in that what had been described was paradise, not the Philippines. In an extreme example, a research fellow objected to the discussion on hermeneutics according to Paul Ricoeur on the ground that Ricoeur was not Filipino. But of course, if the gentleman's position were tenable, for consistency's sake Filipinos should give up Arabic numerals in Philippine mathematics because they are "Arabic." Absurd, but nonetheless indicative of a subtle temperament that is urging Filipino scholars to approach Philippine issues and concerns with a native eye and perception.

And, just as arabic numbers are going to stay, (as they certainly are) hermeneutics appear to be gaining ground. Even among papers which did not show evidence of familiarity with hermeneutics, methods of interpretation (a growing interest in the symbolic, mythological, and metalinguistic expressions of the people) veered towards that direction, as Reynaldo Ileto's *Pasyon and Revolution* has. It is a work gaining acceptance more widely, and influencing many other scholars. Interest in folk arts and arts for the folk like *komiks* is steadily rising. There was even a proposal to revise the traditional and narrow criteria of "form and content" for the movies and for literature. *How* the arts are being used and for *whose interest*, should be basic questions for the critic-scholar, it was proposed.

Minor note should be taken of the level of interest and participation by certain large sectors of the colleges and universities in the country, a great concentration of which are located in Metropolitan Manila. A close look at the majority of active participation as well as representation in the core membership of the PSAI and the First National Philippine Studies Conference shows that only a few of the large or significant universities are strongly behind the

thrust towards promotion and concern for Philippine studies. There were universities in the Metropolitan Manila area for whom representation was conspicuously lacking. There was a feeling among participants that institutional interest in the conference was some kind of indicator of active concern for the current problems of the nation.

Even more significantly, the trend from descriptive scholarship towards critical and interpretative work was clearly demonstrated in many papers. Scholarly *reflection* and the search for what all that assembled data means for the Filipino as both citizen and scholar was what the First National Conference on Philippine Studies was all about. It is that reaching out towards reflection that is most salutary for national intellectual life. The conference was surely an indicator of both a desire for, and a realization of the coming of age of Filipino intellectuality. The conference was both an invitation to think and to be Filipino. The theme could well have been *magpaka-Pilipino*, an ideal and a task well on its way.