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Kasaysayan at Estetika ng Sinakulo at Ibang Dulang Panrelihiyon sa Malolos

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Book Reviews

KASAYSAYAN AT ESTETIKA NG SINAKULO AT IBANG DULANG PANRELIHIYON SA MALOLOS (Kalakip ang Orihinal, Partitura, mga Larawan ng Pagtatanghal). By Nicanor G. Tiongson. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1975. xxxii, 342 pages. Cloth ₱49, paper ₱29.

As indicated by the title, there are really two aspects of religious drama in Malolos that Tiongson's study deals with: history (*kasaysayan*) and aesthetics (*estetika*). While undoubtedly related, these aspects are nevertheless distinct, and therefore require different approaches. It is for this reason that this review discusses them separately.

Sinakulo, for the most part, is devoted to the history of the different forms of religious drama in Malolos. After a brief description and history of the town, chapter 1 identifies as the particular roots of this kind of drama, written works like *Martir sa Golgota* and the *Missale Romanum*, and the performances of dramatic troupes like the "Cenakulistang Pasay." Chapter 2 is a description of the shorter forms of religious drama such as the dance in honor of the paschal candle, the *panunuluyan* (a dramatization of Joseph and Mary's search for an inn), and the *santakrusan* (a Maytime procession related to the finding of the Cross by Queen Helena).

The center of the historical research of the book is found in Chapters 3 and 4, both discussing the *sinakulo* (a dramatization of Christ's life, usually preceded and followed by other events in salvation history like the Creation or the Assumption of Mary). Using the 1973 presentation of Barrio Tikay in Malolos as example, these chapters discuss in great detail the many elements that go into this dramatic form. The first chapter painstakingly shows how the text of the *sinakulo* from Tikay came to be — which scenes came from which sources, how dialogue and narration were used, and what additions the director made. The second chapter, on the other hand, describes the actual production and performance during Holy Week. The mechanics of production such as sets, lights, costumes and even the *artipisyales* (stage devices used for special effects) are explained well through the use of excellent illustrations and photographs. Still more important, one gets a glimpse of the interesting

dynamics – both personal and social – among those involved in the production itself and also among the audience. The last part of this chapter is a detailed account of each performance from Palm Sunday to Easter.

Chapter 5 consists of similar descriptions of other dramatic forms related to the *sinakulo*. These are the *pagdakip* (an outdoor reenactment of the arrest of Jesus in the garden), the *Pilato* (the story of Pilate after he sentenced Jesus), and the *Elena* (a dramatization of the search for the Holy Cross).

In thus presenting the history of the various forms of religious drama in Malolos, Tiongson has accomplished no mean task. His sharp eye for detail as well as his vivid style paint a finely drawn picture of religious drama, especially for the reader unacquainted with it. Furthermore, his extensive use of interviews with people actually involved in these forms gives to the book a definite sense of authenticity. Persons like Ka Selo or Saning Camua, and scenes such as the Last Supper or Boanerhes's courtship of Magdalena come to life in the pages of the book. Hence, one can only say that there is no substitute to reading Tiongson's *Kasaysayan* short of witnessing an honest-to-goodness production.

The second aspect of Tiongson's study deals with the aesthetics of the different dramatic forms he has very well described. While limited to Chapter 6 only, this aspect is of great importance because it discusses "the external attitude toward beauty or quality, and the deeper root and source of this attitude in religious drama" ("*ang panlabas na pagtingin sa kagandahan o katangian at ang higit na malalim na ugat at bukal ng pagtinging ito sa dulang panrelihiyon*"; p. 166). In other words, here one finds what the study considers to be the overall picture (or theory, if you will) of religious drama in Malolos, based on the preceding chronicle of its history. Unfortunately, it is in this area where the study has its weak points, both in what it says and in what it leaves out. The reason for this, one can say, lies in the failure of the study to consider the precise religious nature of these dramatic forms.

Chapter 6 makes a great deal about the relationship between religious drama and its social situation. And rightly so, since all drama exists in a social context. In this regard, it identifies the two factors responsible for the golden age of religious drama (1907–1960), namely, relative prosperity (*mas maluwag na kabuhayan*) and the culture of religion (*kultura ng relihiyon*).

In the section entitled "Estetika ng Kahirapan," the study describes how a prosperous rural economy supported by a strong sense of community makes the production of religious drama easier. It shows furthermore how the particular socioeconomic configuration in the barrio actually determines the very shape of the dramatic production. These points are certainly well made. However, they do not explain why religious drama in particular appeared and prospered. The issue is important, because the text sometimes gives the impression that the people engaged in religious drama for the simple lack of anything else to do:

What was there to occupy and entertain oneself with but to decorate the church and the float of the Virgin, to offer, to build the *galilea* and to follow the endless processions throughout the year, especially after one has bought and sewn clothes, made sweets and *letse plan*, bathed and shampooed the whole morning, and gone to the only moviehouse once a week? There was nothing indeed, nothing.

Ano pa nga ba ang aatupagin at paglilibangan ng mga ito kundi ang pag-gayak sa simbahan at karosa ng Birhen, ang pag-aalay, pagtatayo ng galilea at pagsunod sa di na natapos na prusisyon sa buong taon, lalo na kung tapos na rin lamang ang pamimili at pananahi ng damit, paggawa ng pastilyas at letse plan, nakapaligo na at nakapaggugo na sa buong umaga, at nakapanood na minsan isang linggo sa kaisa-isang sinehan? Wala na nga, wala na (pp. 169–70).

The issue raised above is partially discussed in connection with the second factor, the culture of religion. One finds the answer as to why religious drama existed in comments like those of Ka Carmen: “to present to the youth the hardship and suffering of Jesus Christ” (“*upang ipakita sa kabataan ang hirap at sakit ni Hesukristo*”; p. 166). This strong didactic element seems to be the key to the appearance and growth of religious drama in Malolos; and conversely, to its decline. The study, however, pays little attention to this. When referred to in relation to the growth or decline of religious drama, it is frequently called either “blind allegiance to religion” (“*bulag na pagsunod sa relihiyon*”) or “fanaticism” (“*panatisismo*”). This may indeed be the case, but the study does not show how the faith of the people is fanatical. For example,

Fanaticism is the root of the *Sinakulo* since the *Sinakulo* is the fruit of the desire of the religious person to present the life and suffering of Jesus Christ as taught in church and found in holy scripture.

Ang panatisismo ang siyang pinagmulan ng Sinakulo sapagkat ang Sinakulo’y bunga ng pagnanais ng taong makarelihiyon na maisalarawan ang buhay at sakit ni Hesukristong itinuturo sa simbahan at matutunghayan sa banal na kasulatan (p. 174).

Without denying the possible presence of fanatical elements in the faith of the people, it is difficult to see from the above statement how or why the desire to present Christ’s life is fanaticism.

This lack of clarity regarding the relationship between religious drama and the faith of the people is the weakest point of the study. The *sinakulo*, *panunuluyan*, *Pilato*, and the other forms discussed by the study are, first and foremost, religious, and this is what shapes them as drama. Hence, it is unfair to criticize them for a lack of a definite beginning, middle and resolution (“*ang mismong pagtatanghal ng orihinal ay paglalahad (presentation) lamang at di pagsasacula sapagkat walang waring tiyak na simula, gitna, at kalutasan ang istorya ng Sinakulo*”; p. 186); and furthermore, to explain this

lack in terms of ignorance (“*Wala sa payak at bulag na pag-iisip nito ang magbigay ng interpretasyon o haká-haka sa isang istorya*”; p. 193). The different forms of religious drama in Malolos are neither Aristotelian nor Chekhovian; thus they must be evaluated from a different viewpoint, and their principle of unity be found elsewhere. This, one can say, lies in their religious character. Within this perspective, for example, it is perfectly understandable why particular scenes in these forms are modified or even omitted as long as the overall effect of the drama remains that of pointing to the life of Christ.

Another related matter is the role of entertainment in these dramatic forms. The study calls attention to the popularity of scenes involving comic characters or special effects as a sign of the decline of religious drama in Malolos. One finds, however, these same elements in many of the scenes said to be popular during the golden age, like the Debate of Nicodemus with the Pharisees or the Ascension. This shows that entertainment has always been an ingredient in religious drama. But what is significant lies in how this element relates to the religious character of these forms. (Is it the sugar-coating of a bitter medicine?) Unfortunately, this is not discussed by the study. It is here that the study could have given a more thorough understanding of religious drama, and through this, a deeper insight into the religious thought-world of the Filipino (especially as it existed independent of the official church).

Nevertheless, *Sinakulo* as it stands remains a valuable contribution to Philippine scholarly research. Aside from the wealth of information it gives in the different chapters and appendices, it is important precisely because of the questions it generates. This review has hopefully made it evident through its discussion of some of the crucial issues in the study, that the book contains substantial material to chew on. One may disagree with it on certain points or lament its summary treatment of some area, but it still provides the groundwork for further research in Philippine religious drama.

Viewed in the wider context of Philippine scholarship, the book also proves its worth. That it is written in Pilipino is itself important. More than this, however, a great part of its value lies in showing that scholarship starts with “being there in the field.” In the particular case of Tiongson, it meant the difficult search for one jealously guarded text, endless interviews with all sorts of people, and long nights of witnessing performance after performance. Examples such as his are especially necessary when much writing in and about the Philippines is built on less solid foundations.

José Mario Francisco