

# Our Cultural Heritage So-Called

By Armando F. Bonifacio

**M**ANY DISCUSSIONS about nationalism involve, either implicitly or explicitly, references to our so-called *cultural heritage*. Statements have been made to the effect that among the means that would help in the formation of nationalism is to focus our people's attention on the value of our own distinct Filipino culture.

There is no apparent agreement, however, as to whether the recognition of the value of our distinct Filipino culture is antecedent to nationalism or consequent to it. Some even believe that it is, in itself, what we mean by nationalism.

And yet, without having to deal with the verbal controversy at this level, we seem to experience a great deal of embarrassment

**When in doubt as to whether we have a Filipino culture that we can call truly our own, just consult actual manifestations around us of what at the start had been foreign. Can we even face this fact?**

whenever we are asked to point to the so-called Filipino culture. Is there a distinct Filipino culture? The perennial exhortation seems to be that, assuming there is the Filipino culture, our main task is its preservation.

We think then of our *papag* system in the barrios, the barber-shop "filosopos", the *bakya* institution, our strong and almost congenital familial loyalty, the unsanitary hand-kissing as a form of respect for our elders, our carabaos and the plow and other primitive means of agriculture, and a host of other traditional cus-

toms and institutions which are admittedly anachronisms in the modern world. We are embarrassed because we cannot seem to accept that these are the things we should preserve and perpetuate, without at the same time being bothered by the thought that this might be an expression of something like a downright cultural regression.

There are indeed beautiful things which we could preserve, among them the Tagalog *Kundimans* which are reflective of the sensitive and sentimental character of our people. There is also the myth about our Filipino womanhood and her classic shyness and tenderness. There is also something about the traditional Filipino gentleman, known for his gallantry, for his devotion and his hardworking character. These things are indeed beautiful, and stories about them seem to sound more like fairy tales than real-life stories.

What then are we to preserve and perpetuate? Most certainly not our plows, our *papag* institution, our so-called strong family ties.

With respect to our family ties alone, one writer (Thomas R. McHale: "The Philippine Cultural Matrix and Economic Development," *Comment*, Number 2, First Quarter, 1957) pointed out that this particular institution does more harm than good to our present economy. Our business enter-

prises are family organizations. Top executives of a business organization are there not so much because of their competence, but because of blood-relationship with the owner-president. Thus business decisions cannot be done without having to regard sentimentalities involved in family relationships. He wrote:

"A family business enterprise . . . engenders constant conflict between business and household obligations and needs. It can buy, sell, sue, invest and spend only in relationship to family conditions. The corporation can measure its actions with the yardstick of efficiency, marginal-productivity and profitability. The family enterprise invariably subordinates such criteria to those of family rather than market values."

If what we are to perpetuate include these ridiculous and worn-out institutions, then nationalism, whatever that may be, would contribute more to the retardation than to progress of this country.

THERE is something uncomfortably fictitious about our so-called culture. ~~There seems to be a presumption, based on false belief, that we do have a distinct culture, something really our own.~~ And this presumption is more revealing of our growing dislike for things foreign than anything else. It seems that in the minds of our people there is a growing rebellion against our pernicious colon-

ial attitude. Our people are beginning to realize perhaps out of sheer envy or jealousy for other more advanced Asian countries, that the so-called colonial mentality is inimical to the progress of our nation. And undoubtedly, this realization is more pronounced in the minds of the leaders of the Filipino nationalist movement.

Indian nationalistic movement seems to be in a much better state because when the leaders of this movement started to rebel against the same colonial mentality of the Indian people and urged them to regard and value what is characteristically Indian there was something unique and tangible they could preserve, something still practical even in the modern setting. The vast Indian population and land, in spite of the ruthless British exploitation, did not suffer much transformation. Much of what is uniquely Indian remained, as the Indian character seems to be less pliable.

Our cultural history, however, is quite different. There was in the first place behind us three burdensome centuries of Spanish subjugation and tyranny. The Spaniards, not caring so much for the plight of the Filipino "natives", saw that it was better to keep our people in the state of ignorance and primitivism than enlightenment. Educational opportunity was limited to the wealthy class. The Educational Decree of 1863 was a royal order

that contemplated the establishment in the Islands of a thorough public school system, but for one reason or another, this royal order was never put into effect. It is no wonder that our national leaders came from the ranks of the elite and educated class who had the chance to go out of the country to see for themselves by comparison the facts about their people. But when our national leaders agitated for reforms, such reforms were not granted and it had to take a bloody revolution to boot out the Spanish colonial power which kept a large segment of our people in complete ignorance.

Throughout the three centuries of Spanish occupation, the culture to which our people was exposed was the Catholic religion and the vulgarities of the friars and the *guardias civiles*. Majority of our people, because they were kept in ignorance and no systematic education was introduced, were not prepared to accept a new culture. If they assimilated features of the new culture, it was out of blind imitation and not out of deliberate and intelligent choice.

THUS, THERE WAS the old and primitive Filipino culture and the alien and strange Spanish culture. Three centuries did not make "Spaniards" out of Filipinos, but at least throughout this long period of cultural intercourse a peculiar cultural synthesis resulted. Our languages became a mixture

of the local and the Spanish language which is now the petpeeve of our *linguists*. The Visayan language contains a lot of Spanish impurities. Many of our ways of living and thinking are characteristically Spanish. This also goes for many of our superstitions and beliefs.

This cultural anomaly was even made worse with the coming of the Americans. The Americans came to this country, not with the object of saving our people from eternal damnation, but *supposedly* to bring enlightenment and democracy to our people. The famous Benevolent Assimilation Proclamation of President McKinley laid down the basic premise of American occupation, to wit:

“. . . it should be the earnest wish and paramount aim of the military administration to win the confidence, respect, and affection of the inhabitants of the Philippines by assuring them in every possible way that full measure of individual rights and liberties which is the heritage of free peoples . . .”

This proclamation is of course only half of the truth for the other half is basically economic.

“. . . hunger for markets and for opportunities to invest capital profitably . . . entered into the shaping of the Far Eastern policy of the United States.” (Kenneth Scott Latourette: *The American Record in the Far East, 1945-1951*, Macmillan Company,

New York, 1952, p. 12)

The good intentions back of the American conquest were revealed by the fact that together with the occupation troops came the educators and legislators. The Bill of 1902 was supposed to train our national leaders in the difficult art of self-government. Indeed the Americans were quite effective in making our people believe that they had an unselfish regard for the inhabitants, that they came as “friends” and not as tyrannical and vulgar conquerors. The effect of this trust on the Filipino psychology cannot be gainsaid. Another new culture was thus introduced to the country and the dynamics of cultural assimilation began to work in a rapid pace. In so short a time as half a century we find that many of our people are more “American” than Filipino.

**A**FTER HALF a century of cultural exposure, our culture was no longer a synthesis of the so-called purely Filipino and the Spanish, but a synthesis of three forces, including now the American. Our spoken language testifies to the Spanish and American influences.

At this point the leaders of the Filipino nationalist movement are at a loss as to which culture they are speaking of—the Filipino culture before the Spaniards, or the Filipino-Spanish culture, or the Filipino-Spanish-American cul-

ture? We could perhaps include, if we have to go further back, the Muslim and the Chinese influences. The Chinese influence certainly cannot be ignored in an exhaustive analysis of the so-called Filipino culture.

If we should be speaking of the purely Filipino culture, we must be thinking of the time of Lapu-Lapu or even earlier, but we cannot do so because we do not have much historical facts about this era. Our relative closeness to the Chinese and Japanese mainland suffices us to believe that even before recorded history Chinese and Japanese cultures had registered effects on the Filipino way of life.

If we have to speak of the Filipino-Spanish culture which was relatively more advanced than the previous era, this undoubtedly is not distinctly Filipino either. In fact, if we have to be very strict with our view of culture, no culture is distinctively one people's. Somehow or other, external influences must come in, unless we are thinking of a mythical or completely isolated community of men.

Considering the foregoing, advocates of a return to our cultural heritage must therefore think twice, and determine just where we are supposed to go and which are we supposed to value. At least what is certain is that those who revere our cultural heritage are not simply interested in building a huge museum to house the primitive implements that sustained the life of our people. We are not simply interested in preserving the features of our old culture as curiosity pieces to amaze the tourists.

The whole issue perhaps goes back to simple semantic distinction. Our culture now is not American nor Spanish nor Chinese. It is a synthesis or the product of various interacting cultural forces. And if we are looking for a distinct Filipino culture, we do not have to turn to the past, misty-eyed and sentimental. A look at ourselves before an honest mirror will give us the picture of ourselves, unflattering perhaps, but nevertheless of ourselves. It would perhaps take a lot of courage and integrity for us to say: "Well, this is our own. Let's face it."—*Inquiry.*

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*"What does your husband work at?  
"Intervals."*

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