

The Instructive Role of Popular Publications

By E. P. Patanne

THE FAMILY has been the chief institution charged with preserving and transmitting from one generation to the next the ideas which this nation accepts and cherishes as tradition. This function of the family is basic to the group. Whether Christian or pagan, the family

discharges the obligation, not only for the benefit of the society at large but also for the sake of posterity. The rise of institutions of learning has challenged the authority and responsibility of the family vis-a-vis its obligation to the group, to an extent where the latter has relinquished part





of its role as an agency of culture transmission. A further intrusion upon this sphere of family responsibility came about with the growth and development of mass media — newspapers, magazines, movies, radio, television and comicbooks — a combination of the most potent instruments of communication. With the refinement of advertising techniques, through these media, it has become possible to sell soap along with the desirable virtues among women. The printed word, along with pictures, is a pervasive force in modern society, assuming an influence vital to the process of nation-building.

This little paper seeks to discuss the proper and responsible

role of popular publications in the Philippines and will confine itself to magazines — Sunday supplements, fortnightlies and monthlies.

The magazines circulated in this country, whether supplements to the dailies or separate publications, have a readership quite distinct from the following of newspapers. What the magazines offer is usually an entirely different fare from the dated stories strewn in the dailies. There is an extended and more permanent form to magazine articles and stories, where the treatment may vary from journalistic to literary. Certainly, there is more of literature in the magazines than in the newspapers. The quality of

this literature may not always be consistently high but in the psychological plane magazine stuff can sink deeper than humdrum bits of humanity recorded in the dailies. And magazines besides disseminating information can also be instructive. It is with regards to this latter function of popular publications that magazines can be counted among the more significant purveyors of culture in the Philippines today.

With the apparent antipathy and apathy shown by students toward textbook learning, popular publications have assumed appealing forms. They offer learning without tears, knowledge with illustrations. And they require no semestral examination. They cover a spectrum of subjects classed as "general interest"—from sex to science— attractive and fascinating face for the reader immersed in a mass culture.

A further delimitation of this discussion is needed. Preoccupation requires my narrowing this paper to the function of the English-language magazine catering to the so-called popular mind.

Since sophistication and distinction are regarded as virtues among the masses, the English-language publications are often held up as arbiters of taste and ideas. Magazines have become the media for norms and ideals. Their readership, however, has determined, often dictated upon these pub-

lications the kind of materials that would ensure continuing patronage and keep circulation and advertising within the bounds which guarantee profits.

Thus, magazines find it more palatable to popular taste to give prominence to the escapades of Hollywood than say, a historical piece dealing with an incident in the Revolution or an article about the rituals of rice cultivation. Herein lies a conflict of interests. The magazine editor is often outvoted by readership, advertising and publisher. But the magazine editor is a creature of compromise. In the end, he would run a profile on Elvis Presley along with a critique on Rizal's novels. This saves and solves an issue.

BUT THE English-language publications which has grown conscious of its fundamental role, partly usurped from the family, are still faced with the more significant problem of fighting down the influence of comicbooks, the movies, radio and television feeding on imported opiates—the tranquilizers and bromides of mass culture where good can hardly be distinguished from the pernicious. An indiscriminate publication of the so-called syndicated or canned materials has brought us moments of entertainment along with neurotic lapses developing out of sheer frustration.

This ugly aspect of the popular publications has submerged whatever feelings of identity which tradition seeks to buoy up amidst the swirl of mass ideas.

In this miasma of mass media, the magazines can define their role. If they seek merely to approach the standards and model of foreign publications, then they shall continue to be recreant to society. It is enough that acculturation has packed a surfeit of foreign ideas into our lives, so that Filipinos today practically grope about looking for themselves. The tendency has been a looking back. Magazines to fulfill that vital role it can assume in national growth must perforce adopt an active, instructive policy. They have started to enlarge upon that function which they share with the family and the school. The task is not easy.

Magazines have amplified the nationalist sentiment but the approach has often been couched in reproachful terms and the treatment of the subject often turns into an evangelical preaching of unity and survival or a dissertation on a concept. It is difficult, at this stage, to explain, move and at the same time criticize a people for lacking such a sentiment. Harangue against the leaders of this country to provide inspiration to the people is not often met with success.

Nationalism as a positive force in nation-building should be developed from a consciousness of race distinction. The approach as many English-language magazines have taken is to let Filipinos discover themselves, their institutions, their culture; not teaching by authority but by example and illustration.

Through feature and fiction, this has been done. What is needed is added and spirited interest in Philippine history, sociology, anthropology, politics, geography, folk literature and the lives and works of illustrious Filipinos. This can provide orientation to thinking. The popularization of great folk epics, the works of Rizal, Mabini, Lopez Jaena, Marcelo del Pilar and others, significant events in our history, discoveries made in the fields of sociology, anthropology and archaeology on these shores—all these can help the Filipino find himself. There is no more nationalistic Filipino than one who feels proud of his race.

Magazine editors, writers and contributors are in a position to diffuse a sense of racial distinction to the people more than textbooks can ever hope to achieve. This is not making a plea for a return to the hills, to the primitive clustered village of life, to stick agriculture. Rather, the task for the magazines, is to bring the past to the present, making no value-judgments, sim-

ply filling up for many a blank tapestry of historical experience.

By accepting that Philippine life and manners are more interesting than the romance of the spinning jenny and the telephone, the magazine editor accepts the priority of articles that can impart national consciousness. Through such articles or stories the popular mind can establish contact with the past and discover an affinity with the minds that produced such grand epics as the *Hudhud*, the *Alim*, the *Maragtas*, *Biag ni Lam-ang*, *Tuwang*, *Ibalon*, and *Darangan*.

Through the magazines, the creative writer can define and dramatize what has been termed "the Philippine experience." The works of our leading scholars, for long regarded as species confined to graduate seminars in universities, have begun to filter into the pages of popular publications. The stuff they write is usually regarded as "heavy, hence not popular, hence not conducive to upping circulation. The old economic consideration always rears its head. Publishers are businessmen first and journalists second. But publishing cannot be divorced from the role which modern society has endowed it, namely, that of contributing something to national experience. And publications must exert a force

other than civic and political.

At this point the question may be raised that if the English-language magazines whose readership is confined to a certain level, the proper and responsible publications which can do a better job of diffusing the nationalist sentiment are those printed in the vernacular as these enjoy a circulation touching the grass roots of our society. There is no doubt they can.

But then the popular publications printed in the dialects are dictated in content to a degree by the mentality and taste of its readership. It is this same readership that has made comicbooks national reading matter, prolonged sufferance in Philippine movies and radio and are most prone to borrowed popular ideas. But it can be said, it is the most nationalistic too.

There can't be any quarrel between the purposes of popular publications, whether in English or in the vernacular. There is a striving in them to assert a Filipino identity, a gradual shedding of stereotype ideas and a reluctance to accept as proper totally alien experiences.

The problem restated is not anymore the total lack of nationalism among magazine editors and writers; rather it is a definition of their role.

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