

On Raul Pertierra's 'Emancipation Within Culture'

Maria Fer Mangahas

The words we use are curious things. They help us to identify phenomena, constituting entities by naming them. As they circulate, new meanings may add on, displace, or compound old ones. In periods of social change, words undergo transformations and new permutations, leading to plural and inchoate connotations. This was an insight that Raymond Williams (1976) explored by tracing the entangled make-up of several 'keywords', including 'culture'. Certain words are elements of the problems in the issues current to their day, issues that cannot be thought through without recourse to these same problematic words, he said.

One conflict is to be found for example between the connotations of 'culture' as something that people share as part of social groups which is its more anthropological sense, and the more lay idea that culture is something that groups can have 'more' or 'less' of (or 'high' and 'low' culture). We cannot logically ascribe a 'limited notion of culture' to Filipinos, nor

blame this for the problems and contradictions going on in Philippine culture as Pertierra proposes in his essay, 'Emancipation Within Culture' (see *Public Policy* Vol II No 4). To do so is to reify, or attribute an abstraction, this thing 'culture', with purposes and forces of its own. The cause and effect relation between historical process and any people's understanding of a particular concept is the other way around. Culture was one of the most complicated words in the English language in the 70s, and in today's age of communication it is possibly the concept of the time. The current complex and manifold usages a word such as 'culture' commands are reflections of the troubles and transformations going on in the world today—not just in the Philippines—many of which turn on identity, community and difference.

Perhaps a more illuminating exercise in semantics would be the exploration of the variable meanings and disparate connotations of a very familiar term: the term 'Filipino'.

Usage of this term dates no earlier than the 16th and 17th centuries. Its etymology derives from a Spanish prince who was only a child when the islands were baptized in his name, and the set of islands it relates to was arbitrarily determined by the European colonial adventures and misadventures of the age. There was a time when as a term it discriminated against the native who was not 'Filipino' but 'Indio'. Much later, it seemed to imply chiefly the culture of the lowland Christian mainstream. A famous Filipino statesman once declared that the Igorots of the Cordillera highlands 'are not Filipinos'. Speaking 'Filipino' as the national language still essentially means speaking Tagalog, the most widely diffused Philippine language (out of the 9 major languages and the 100 or so languages spoken by smaller numbers of people), and which is a reflection of the dominance of Manila, the powerful center, vis-à-vis the peripheries (in like manner as the spread of the English language throughout the world is reflective of America's prominence). Today, Filipinos have made their presence felt in many corners of the world, concurrent with other global diaspora, and the term *Pinoy* is an affectionate self-referent. By contrast, the term is popularly spelled in England as 'Philippino' or 'Philippina,' the latter also connoting 'househelp' (as in 'my Philippina').

Many of the concerns and criticisms that Pertierra raises have to do with the representation of what is

'Filipino'. Ironically enough, those Filipinos who successfully resisted colonization became minoritized in the long run; thus the 'imagining' of the Philippine nation is rooted in its first conceptualization as a territory and organization as an entity by colonial administrators. With the overlaying of these two successive and very different colonial cultures that dominated our past, it is no wonder that the representations can appear confused, especially in the celebratory performances of ourselves to ourselves, which are most prominent as official productions of the state. Inevitably we find we must celebrate both the colonial heritage, as well as our resistance to it. It is out of these paired and conflicting dimensions of historical experience that some vital sense of Filipino national identity was born, more than a century ago.

In respect of the flashy celebrations recently commemorating the Centennial, it would be good to inquire into who are the real individuals behind these (as well as the illusory touristic images) which Pertierra bemoaned for their 'lack of imagination' or creativity. Since sometimes these are no more than what the audience expects, why is the audience uncritical of the 'lack of a coherent narrative in the performance'? Perhaps the standards for a 'good show' are clearer than the expectations on *content* in popular appreciation of these occasions. Perhaps it also underscores the level of awareness of events and figures in Philippine history among Filipinos.

Alongside the state, social scientists have also played a significant role in 'imagining' Filipino culture and society. 'Ethnological expertise' for instance was drawn on by the American colonial administration in constructing a grid of Philippine society (including most of the current labels for the lowland Christian, Muslim, and non-Christian non-Muslim groups) which still continues to be the model of the make-up of the population into the present. And we can recall the characterization of typical 'Filipino values' by some academics in the 70s, which tended to be negative. Scholars need to consider the possibility of projecting (their own) middle-class and ethnic biases in coming to conclusions on generalized 'Filipino' culture and society. The 'damaged culture hypothesis' is a case in point. Social surveys point out that the 'penchant for self-bashing' in the Philippines is an upper class tendency; it seems that the poor are quicker to identify themselves as being Filipinos than the rich (Mangahas 1988).

How much do we know about the plurality of local imaginations and 'resistance' to encroaching cultures? It is well to examine some critical contentions and observations about 'Filipino culture' at face value. The notion that Filipinos 'lack culture' for example; that centuries of colonial experience have rendered the Christian lowlands

'merely imitative' of foreign culture. A recently published book by Fenella Cannell (1999) notes how a lowland Christian area is not in the habit of paying conscious attention to their culture in terms of 'tradition'. Among other things, Cannell illustrates how in rural Bicol, selected images of external culture and key performances—the Christ figure and the reading of his passion, glamorous images of Hollywood and the beauty pageant, for example—are taken up, mimicked and 'mastered', and she suggests that these enactments can be linked up with pre-colonial ways of negotiating relationships of power.

We need to explore more of our tacit culture/s, expose the themes of historical dialogue on local culture, and consider the varieties of contentious 'imaginings' that are going on.

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