

National Artists and Artists' Welfare

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Last year in Manila, a week before an international dance festival, hosted by the Cultural Centre of the Philippines, a National Artist, Atang de la Rama, who contributed enormously to popularization of folk drama, sarsuwela, passed away. I joined the officials and hundreds of lovers of sarsuwela who attended the funeral. To my surprise, President Corazon Aquino came. Her Excellency was not only the guest of honour, but the keynote speaker who read the eulogy. The Cultural Centre invited top artists and its resident artists to stage excerpts of Atang de la Rama's famous sarsuwelas and the excellent performances once again brought the audience to tears. The coffin of the beloved National Artist was covered by the country's flag. Accompanied by a symphonic band, the funeral march was grand and moving. Such a symbolic and significant act was a display of sincere respect towards an artiste who devoted her life to the art of the sarsuwela. It was a touching event indeed.

I also noticed, in the following week, a practice of showing respect to living National Artists, that is, whenever a National Artist enters the auditorium or theatre, his or her name would be announced and a spot light would follow until he or she is seated. The audience, would undoubtedly give the artistes warm applause.

The examples mentioned, illustrate the admirable practises of showing respect to National Artists in the Philippines. However, it is also widely reported that a large number of trained artists in all fields are unemployed and many outstanding artists simply cannot devote all their time to their arts because of the almost total lack of material remuneration. In a country which has faced a great number of calamities in the recent years, economic recovery is understandably seen as the national priority. Thus the welfare of the great number of struggling artists is neglected.

Many do not receive social security benefits, or health insurance.

The abovementioned accounts thus highlight two dimensions in the issue of National Artists and artists' welfare: prestige and economics.

Without arts, a country is sterile and boring, the Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr. Goh Chok Tong once said. An artist, according to the Chinese, is the 'Engineer of the Soul'. Artists inspire. They think the unthinkable. They are creative creatures who dream the impossible dreams. But the place of art and culture in nation building is easily neglected as priority is always given to economic growth and political modernization. In many developing countries, the traditional patrons of the arts, the kings or village chiefs are no longer in the centre of economic and political power. The centrality of arts and culture to nation building has even come under serious questioning by politicians.

Artists in developing countries have three critical problems.

The first is the mass produced outpouring of commercial popular arts from the west and local communities. For example the domination of the entire world information system by a few news agencies poses a serious challenge to the economically less powerful peoples.

Artists who have not yet acquired the skills of packaging and marketing their arts lose out in our highly competitive consumerist modern society. It is sad to note that some

of those not so good second or third rate 'artists' manage to capture the attention of the press or public precisely because they have learnt the tricks of marketing. For those artists who are unwilling to channel their creative energy to commercialization, they are in danger of losing out.

Cultural domination and dependence fostered by such information patterns invisibly change the cultural perspective of the peoples. Many indigenous art forms today find no audience. The battle for the preservation and innovation of the indigenous artists will be fierce as consumerism and the global culture prevail.

The second problem is how artists deal with changes in their support system. In many traditional societies, there is a long tradition of voluntary individual and community collaboration for the public good. Performances at temple fairs or village harvest festivals are funded collectively or organized under royal patronage. In modernized societies, art becomes an economic product. It loses its importance as a creative cultural expression.

The third problem is the imported idea of professionalism in the arts. Visitors are always fascinated by the lively Balinese music and dance presented at social gatherings or rituals at the top tourist destination of Indonesia. Yet many do not quite know that these outstanding performers are NOT professional musicians or dancers. Dance and music are part of their village life. Everyone is an artist. The danger of organizing professional theatre and

dance companies based on western models is that only a small group of people will be paid to engage in creative activities. Theatre performances will be separated from rituals. Music and dance making activities will not be social processes that involve all in the community. Rather, they will be staged by a small group of professional artistes for the large number of non artistes. If we are to keep our tradition of involving the masses in creative activities, then it would be more sensible to continue to fund the large number of amateur artistes, along with the funding of selected reputable professional companies. Maintaining a large base to promote the arts at the grassroots level is more important than creating an ivory tower of arts for the privileged.

There are essentially two criteria for the selection of a National Artist. One is to judge the artist entirely on his or her own artistic achievement and the other to assess his or her contribution to the promotion of the art, for example, in educating the public and disseminating information about the art form.

In Singapore the Cultural Medallion was instituted in 1979 to give recognition to individuals who have shown artistic talent, creativity and commendable achievements in the arts. This award is now administered by the National Arts Council, which is a newly formed statutory board to spearhead the promotion of the arts in Singapore. The award is conferred by the Minister for Information and the Arts. The selection criteria for the Cultural Medallion are as follows:

The recipient must be a citizen of Singapore or permanent resident. The recipient must have attained artistic excellence. The recipient's works must have benefitted or helped in the cultural development of Singapore. There is no restriction on the age of the recipient. Persons who have received National Day Awards for community services rendered are eligible for consideration.

In some countries, it is felt that awards should also be given to those who contribute substantial financial resources to the arts. For example, in Singapore, the Patron of the Arts Awards, first instituted in 1983, are given in acknowledgement of financial contributions of over S\$ 300,000 over three years, by private organizations to culture and the arts.

The Friends of the Arts and Associate of the Arts Awards were introduced in 1986 in recognition of smaller contributions of S\$ 100,000 to S\$ 299,999 and S\$ 50,000 to S\$ 99,999 respectively.

The selection of the National Artist

must not be carried out as a cake slicing exercise where each artist can expect to receive a piece sometime in their life. Potential National Artists must be very carefully screened for suitability as they will serve as an inspiration to others. To cite examples from Singapore, the Ministry of Information and the Arts has two types of grants for artists. The first are grants to artists/arts groups for exposure. To promote Singaporean talent overseas, travel grants are awarded to established arts organizations and individuals to participate in international arts events and festivals. Ad hoc project grants are also awarded to artists and arts groups to perform or exhibit works abroad.

The second type of grants nurture talents. Training grants for artists are disbursed to help talented individuals develop their skills. There are Overseas Tertiary Training Subsidies for the arts for potential artists to receive training in arts institutions abroad. There are arts institutions grants to subsidise students studying at local arts institutions. There are grants to practising artists for

upgrading through short courses / attachment abroad. There are ad hoc grants for artists to participate in workshops and seminars, both held abroad and in Singapore.

This however does not imply that we should create an artificial inequality among artists. There should be plans to provide the names of artists and art educators with an infrastructure of financial assistance, scholarships, venues, health insurance and pension.

The arts are not only transmitted, they are products of creative processes. They are not simply historical and only related to the past. There are meaningful and functional and vitally concerned with the present. Honouring outstanding artists as national treasures is a way of showing our respect to the unsung heroes who have in very special creative ways helped to shape our cultural destiny.

National Artists, no doubt, will continue to find their source and inspiration from their land and countryman and to dedicate their achievements to the people.