

Going Back To The Roots

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The current trend in my country is to be more nationalistic than ever before. This surge of patriotic feelings, principles, and efforts was probably brought about by the past two decades of dictatorship and subsequent results on the whole Filipino psyche.

The 7,100-island archipelago of the Philippines has a plurality of cultural and political influences brought about by trade and colonization. Our history is an intricate web of Asian, Spanish, and American influence. Since the Spanish rule our customs and traditions have manifested the half-breed, mestizo culture. It is a blending in intellect and passion of the East and West, and, to my mind, this has always differentiated the Philippines from her Asian neighbors. After the Spanish rule came the American rule, followed by the Japanese. Before this we traded and co-existed with various Asian tribes and royalties. As a result of the mixed marriages and influences in our history the 20th century Filipino has become a heterogeneous entity.

It is interesting to note that in 1958, in Dacca, in then East Pakistan, a delegation headed by Lucrecia R. Kasilag was sent by the Philippines Women's University to the International Festival of Dance and Music. For the Philippines performance, Kasilag asked the Pakistanis for a piano. There was none available for there did not seem to be any need for a Western instrument in an Asian festival. Kasilag had to make do with a guitar but it occurred to her how heavily Westernized was the Philippines. The Filipino delegates were shocked with the realization that they were outsiders among fellow Asians. After this, there was a definite resolve to probe deeper into authentic Filipino cultural heritage. In the next decades researchers, dance artists, and representatives of various institutions have gone to the plains and hinterlands of our country to document dance, record music, and interview people at the grassroots for extensive studies of the origin and background of our folk dances. Many of the folk presentations were discovered to be deeply rooted in Asian culture. The researchers discovered regional identity in movements, music, costumes and accessories among the ASEAN

countries: Brunei Darrusalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. In the book, "A Sound of Tambours," published in 1991 by the Bayanihan Folk Arts Center, costume specialist Isabel A. Santos wrote, "...migratory waves of Indonesians and Malays whose cultures bear the strong imprints of ancient Chinese and Indian civilizations settled in the Philippines long before the Spanish presence. Adding to these intercultural contacts was the introduction of Mohammedanism by Indian and Arab traders to Malaysia, Indonesia and southern Philippines as early as the 13th century, infusing Islamic elements into the region's costume and ornamentation." In the same book Lucrecia R. Kasilag, now a National Artist, wrote her observations on Asian music. She said, "largely in the oral tradition, the indigenous musical systems of the Asean region which consists of six-member countries...all share certain common usage, which underline the importance of music in daily living. A lot of commonalities exist among their ethnic musical instruments, although each country's traditional music genre bears a distinctive

personality and individuality of its own."

These findings are presently establishing parameters in the staging of our folk dances. Ten to twenty years ago, folk dances presentations were described as too

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commercialized and tourist-oriented, a big disservice to Philippine art. With the help of photographs, recorded music, and video materials, folk dance choreographers are encouraged to study the origins, and staying as close to the original heritage is indeed a good way to establish a national identity. It is

hoped, though, that in seeking our Asian roots, they have added to our innate temperament a quality that is uniquely Filipino.

With the present tendency to "go back to the roots" I see that a problem may arise. I ask myself, which roots do we go back to? Should they be just our Asian roots? Are our Spanish and American heritage to be considered mere Western influence? The words, "Western influence" bring about reactions of mild resentments to complete abhorrence. This was noted by theatre director Nonon Padilla on the topic of "How To Deal With Western Art." He wrote: "In the Philippines as probably in many other countries as well, the situation is one of polarity and bifurcation. In the field of culture and art to take only one area where the problem is seen in extremes, there are those who accept Western influence by way of Western art, as dogma, as the sole criteria of perfection and validity. On the other hand, especially in the nationalist context, there are those who consider Western art as an incubus. What is an incubus? In superstitious beliefs, an incubus is

an evil spirit that sleeps with a person or persons and is supposed to lie upon these people in their sleep and have sexual intercourse. So for some, Western influence—be it in the form of technology or art—is an incubus that dwells upon the native soul (and here we are talking specifically about art so we would mean the artist, with respect to the native soul). Now this evil spirit fornicates with the artist, against the soul's wishes in the obscure regions of the political and social affinities. This malevolent ghost sucks out the essence of the Filipino, if the artist is Filipino, draining him of his true self in the process."

What is truly a Filipino artist? Is he the one who uses indigenous materials in his paintings and installations or ethnic instruments in his musical compositions? As a choreographer, if I choose to create a work to the music of Bach or Beethoven, is there a need for me to exorcise the incubus that has slept with me ever since the day that I was born?

If, in order to achieve a national identity, we have to go back to our

ethnic and rural roots alone, then perhaps it is a superficial way to find a Filipino identity. We would come up with half an identity because ethnic and rural are not our only roots. The quest would be genuine if it re-examines the whole past for its value to the contemporary Filipino. He is the Filipino whose consciousness has lived and

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become what it is today because of the changes in his history. People never remain the same. They move within a time continuum of past, present, and future, and it is their history that remains a constant. "Going back to the roots" should mean the affirmation of that past. Whether we go back to our roots or

go to the opposite direction, whatever we produce as artists will remain Filipino. An ethnic-inspired work or a European classical ballet-inspired work is still the work created by a consciousness that can only be Filipino, if the artist is Filipino.

In contemporary dance, the blending of our Eastern and Western heritage in choreographic structure was spearheaded by Alice Reyes, a Filipino choreographer who studied in the United States. Following the pioneering works of folk dance choreographers, Leonor Orosa Geoguingco and Rosalia Merino Santos, Reyes continued to build a repertoire of Philippine-inspired themes translated in to contemporary dance. As a young member of her company in the 70s and 80s I was witness to the visual import of Reyes' choreographic thrust to local and foreign audience. It became apparent to me later on, as a choreographer, that the use of Western dynamics along with its spatial and level designs gave new breath to the mysterious and controlled elements of Eastern themes. The combination gave foreign audiences an idea of Asian culture presented in a dance

vocabulary that they understood. Thus, we were able to compete with international dance companies and yet remain uniquely Filipino.

Today, the same kindling of nationalism is giving our young choreographers a resolve to do “something Filipino,” which generally means, something more Eastern than Western in theme, structure and form. There are a few Filipino choreographers who have successfully found a vocabulary of movements that reflect our ethnic roots. One of them is Agnes Locsin, a modern dance choreographer and instructor who studied in the United States. She was formerly based in Davao which is located in Mindanao, south of the Philippines, and presently staying in Manila as the head of Ballet Philippines’ second company. Her choreographic innovations based on tribal movements have been well-received in the Philippines and abroad. For those who are unable to go into field research and feel the pulse of the rural folk and tribes on a personal basis, as Locsin has done, this is where research materials prove invaluable.

On the other hand, there is also

an influx of Filipino choreographers coming from the West. Well-versed in the Western structure and form in choreography, they have also presented works that have had good impact on audiences. Their works reflect not the ethnic or tribal movements that are alien to them, but universal movements that simply reflect themselves as artists. One such choreographer is Denisa Reyes, a Filipino who spent ten years in the United States working with American dance companies and studying in American dance institutions. She has choreographed numerous works in the mode of Western choreographers; works that appear too Western to some nationalists. To the liberals, these are works that carry a universal message defined in dance by an artist who happens to be a Filipino. After her came Rico Labayen, Kristin Jackson, and Hasel Sabas, to name a few, all educated in the United States yet very Filipino and unique in the expression of themselves.

Some artists choose to go back to their roots as they deal with ethnic and tribal pieces, while other artists take other directions and problems. However, I am convinced that this diversity is the very expression of

the Filipino character which is both Asian and Western. The question of Filipino-ness is a misleading problem if we attempt to seek answers in specific periods of time in our history. The national character of Filipino dance is intrinsic to a work of a Filipino artist as it expresses a soul equally unique amongst its Asian neighbors. Such work as it expresses a Filipino aspiration—will always bear the imprint of the national psyche.