

The Economy of Culture

The Philippine Experience

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The economy of a country is a matter of public record and constant official concern. The economy of its culture, however, is much less public, not at all obvious, and a matter of paramount concern only to those who work in culture. It generally receives scant official attention, especially in a developing country.

An Balangaw Performing Arts Group

Based in Tacloban City, this small group turned ten on December 8, 1994. It has no outside funding at all, no connection to a school, government or non-government organization. It is led and directed by Joycie Dorado, artistic director, a faculty member of the University of the Philippines at Tacloban; its members are mostly students.

And yet the question and its sub-questions are important: How is culture enabled within an economy and a culture? How do theater and other performing groups survive? How is culture supported in the Philippines, a developing country with economic problems and a wealth of theater groups?

One must point out at the start that in the Philippines there is no truly professional theater, because, as I have pointed out elsewhere, "its Third World economy classifies theater as non-essential for survival and allows little funding for it. Theater groups are perpetually impoverished. And yet it is in these conditions that theater has been shown to be no luxury but truly a necessity. Groups have multiplied, created new works, defined their own aesthetics, and achieved standards of creation and performance that cannot be called 'Third World.' "

And they have survived by many strategies and combinations of strategies that are as creative as their performances.

Although one cannot present a definitive picture of the economy of a culture without exploring all performing groups, one can present a range of experiences and some data of interest by examining some cases: a cross section of theater groups and their strategies for survival.

An Balangaw devotes itself to retrieving, recording, and presenting aspects of Leyteno culture. Its members go to each other's and friends' hometowns and conduct research in traditional songs, dances, drama forms, and folk life. These are then woven into performances by the artistic director, and presented to the local folk: in Tacloban at the UP, or at residences and restaurants. For such presentations they may charge a modest admission fee, or request donations. In the *kuratsa*, for example, a scarf is laid down on the floor, and the audience throws money on it. The *Pastores*, a traditional Christmas dramatization of shepherds finding the Christ child, is presented for free.

Most often, however, An Balangaw presents its programs at town fiestas. The group pays for its own transportation, and charges a fee of P 5000 and local expenses (board and lodging), presenting in return a program of Leyte songs, dances and drama. The group's longest performance was a summer tour of some towns in the Visayas, in which they were given only fees and local expenses. They were especially successful in small towns in Iloilo and Capiz, which did not have their own cultural groups, and were inspired by the example of this modest group, creating performances out

of their own local culture.

The members do not receive salaries, but are given an out-of-town allowance to enable them to buy *pasalubong*—gifts to bring home. Thus out of the P 5,000 perhaps P 1,500 may be left to add to the fund for operating expenses. Since the members are students, there is a rapid turnover after graduation, and An Balangaw tries to keep some full-time members, supporting one or two through such fund-raising projects as T-shirt silk-screening and the making of greeting cards. It is a registered foundation.

In the Balangaw model, one sees how little money is needed to survive—and how much effort, imagination, and dedication.

The Silay City Sarswela

Silay, Negros Occidental, is a small city 14 kilometers away from Bacolod, the provincial capital. In the 1920s it was called the Paris of Negros because it had a small, full-scale theater in which Italian opera, Spanish *zarzuela* troupes, and local *sarswela* groups performed.¹ For 12 years now, it has staged a yearly *sarswela* competition for the town fiesta (November 13, feast of San Diego). Each *barangay* (the smallest unit of government) is invited to present a *sarswela* conceived, written, directed, and performed by its members.

As a result, the *barangays* stage plays about their lives: fishermen and their problems with landowners near the seashore; mountain villages and their lack of technological help; the growing drug problems near the city;

traditional concerns such as family, gambling and cockfighting, young love, the desire for education and progress, domestic dissension. The actors and singers, directors and composers come from the neighborhood. So do the expenses: some P 5000 from the *barangay* fund if available, snacks from the community, small cash donations (P 100 maximum) from neighbors, costumes from the actors' own wardrobes or those of friends.

In the early years, the Silay Arts Council and the Mayor's Office would sometimes provide a subsidy of P 1500 maximum per *barangay*. They also provided performance improvement input by inviting lecturers from the Cultural Center of the Philippines. Now the Mayor's Office has four employees, full-time cultural workers—all of them formerly connected with winning *sarswelas*—who do what they call "legworking"—going around to the *barangays* and helping them out with their performances.

The prize money of P 10,000 goes to the winning *barangay*, and is usually divided among cast and crew, although some of it may be kept as a revolving fund for the next year's *sarswela*. Some *barangays* present plays, some don't; some don't present each year. But there always are *sarswelas*; they are a continuing expression of Silay culture.

At the First National Theater Festival in 1992, *Matam-is Man Gali ang Kalamay* (Sugar is Sweet After All), was among those chosen to be presented at the Cultural Center. The sugar workers of Hacienda Adela had spun their story from their dealings with the landowner, their problems with cash and work animals, their ambitions to go to the capital to find opportunity, and the like. The result was *naif* grassroots theatre. The homespun acting and singing (a sole guitar as accompaniment; farmworkers as actors) were authentic and convincing, and seemed to indicate how theater begins in the lives of

ordinary people.

Theater in Silay thus has a connection to the local government—one that is steady if minimal. The *sarswela* survives because of tradition, volunteerism, and a community spirit.

The Dagyaw Theater and Dance Company

This amazing high school group belongs to the Iloilo National High School. Its four-act dance drama, *Hinilawod*, was without a doubt one of the best entries to the First National Theater Festival. The young actors had not only studied the Western Visayas epic of the same name, but had interacted with Elena Gardose, 90, one of the few living epic chanters. (The epic is chanted only by women called *binukot*, who dedicate their whole lives to it, and train their successors.)

With their director Edwin Duero and choreographer Agnes Locsin, they studied the chant, the music, and the instruments. The final performance blended music, chanting, dance, costume, and the energy, enthusiasm and art of the young musicians/dancers/chanters into a moving journey into regional literary heritage. Even when one did not understand the Kinaray-a dialect, it was powerful theater. *Hinilawod* has travelled to Spain, Japan, the United States, Canada, and many Philippine cities and towns, and has totalled 127 performances since 1992.

The troupe and its productions (dance dramas, choral performances, message songs) are funded first by the school, with 1/3 of the P 15 cultural fee charged students (P 5 x 4000 students). This provides the MOE (Maintenance and Operating Expenses). To this the school—headed by Riza Amaguin, a principal committed to the performing

arts—adds some of its savings, for equipment and costumes.

The Local Government is a source of sponsorship of, up to P 50,000 per project. For it Dagyaw presents plays on nationalism or regional culture (e.g. *Hinilawod*), or programs on the environment, against drugs, for alternative activities. As a high school group, it is an excellent model for all of the above themes.

Sponsorship by the Department of Education, Culture and Sports (DECS), by other schools, by mayors of other towns in Iloilo and Capiz, and by civic groups such as the Rotary Club is still another source of income. Dagyaw receives a stream of invitations to perform, and must refuse some, since Duero allows only one performance on a weekday (Friday) in order to enable the members to do well in their studies. ("We must belie the belief that actors and singers do not do well in school.")

The out-of-town performances are done for a fee plus local expenses (transportation, accommodations, food, venue). The fee is flexible, e.g. P 5,000 for the Filipino Club within the school, P 12,000 to P 18,000 for DECS and mayors of small towns, P 15,000 for matinees and P 25,000 for evening performances for such groups as the Rotary Club. For international tours, sponsors (CCP, the Department of Tourism) provide transportation, and the foreign hosts the local expenses.

The full Dagyaw travelling troupe consists of 27 members, which can be scaled down to 16 if necessary. The students receive no salaries, but

are given allowances which they may choose to spend or save in a savings account administered by a treasurer.

Dagyaw is a theater group fully supported by the school and by its own performances—and thus by a network of community groups: government agencies, civic clubs, local governments, and the private sector. It has shown what a high school group can do for local culture, and for this it is accepted, applauded, endorsed and supported.

The Kaliwat Theater Collective.

The name means “generations of a race”; the group was founded in 1988 and is based in Davao City. It is “a cultural organization in Mindanao that actively engages in popular theater work that enhances the culture-creating capacities of the grassroots. Its cultural action processes use arts and traditions to effect social change, affect social policies and develop [the] people’s heritage” (Kaliwat, 1994).

When I first encountered its work in 1984, it was one of more than a hundred Mindanao drama groups working in this frontier country, exploring and expressing the culture, presenting and analyzing the problems. It has worked especially with one cultural community, the Manobos of Arakan Valley, Cotabato, “surfacing community issues, [developing]...among the people the ability to articulate and be critical of their situation, and [encouraging]...them to become cultural producers rather than cultural consumers.”

In short, the Kaliwat artists have worked and stayed with the community and have become their partners. Although they at first entered as outsiders and facilitators, Kaliwat and Manobo artists have since fused their work with benefits to both, the Kaliwat workers gaining understanding, the Manobos self-esteem.

Kaliwat pieces are “popular theater for empowering the culturally ‘silenced’ minority.” Such productions as “*Siak sa Duha Ka Damgo*” (Crack Between Two Dreams) “carry the themes [of] local history, environmental protection and self-determination,” and take these on tour to promote “community-to-community linkage.” Behind the performances lie many hours and now years of cultural research, community education, organization and mobilization, exchange and linkages (hosting foreign and local visitors; joint projects; contact-building for exchange programs in Australia, Canada, the U.K., Ireland and South America), performance tours, related activities like publication and radio broadcasts, training, cultural action workshops (in 14 communities in the past year) production management and resource generation.

Its “partner organizations” include organizations of tribal Filipinos, the church (especially the Redemptorist Mission Team), development agencies in Davao and Kidapawan, Cotabato, and foreign entities such as the Asian Center for Cultural Exchange in Kyoto (which took Kaliwat to Japan).

The year 1993–1994 yielded “four major productions, a regional tour in Western Mindanao which covered seven town centers and four barrios, a national tour covering seven major cities (ten centers), and a tour in fifteen municipalities and cities in Japan. A special production for children was also mounted, the narrative of

which was extracted from the stories for children as told by the villagers of the Arakan valley. The piece was presented to audiences...children and adults coming from various ethnicities, social classes and age groups in Davao, Dansalan and Quezon City."

All this is backed by funds of about P 2.2m yearly from: (1) Grants from OXFAM UK/I and DFAT-Australia (totalling about P 1.5m; (2) Donations from foreign sources amounting to about P 50,000; (3) Income generated from projects and fees to the tune of about P 250,000; (4) Production and Equipment Grants; and (5) Sponsorships and Ticket Sales.

The *Kaliwat Papers* present a rich history and a wealth of experience, of a theater group that has gone beyond performance to cultural action, development and dissemination. Although still based in a very specific community, that of the Arakan Valley Manobos, its experience and expertise have escalated beyond the base; its achievement reaching out towards regional, national, and international interaction.

*The Philippine Educational Theater
Association (PETA)*

PETA is the Philippines' foremost semi-professional theater company. There is, as we have explained, no truly professional theater in the country because of the economy, but PETA comes close to it. It has survived for more than a quarter-century, and turns 30 in the 1996-97 season. On its 28th

Major Theater Season in 1994, it mounted a translation and adaptation of Goethe's *Faust*, directed by visiting German artist Fritz Bennewitz.

PETA was founded by Cecile Guidote on April 7, 1967, as a non-profit, non-stock, non-government theater institution, and the base of her vision of a national theater. In 1971 it became the UNESCO-ITTI (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization-International Theatre Institute) Center for the Philippines.

It has since mounted some 200 productions of original plays, translations and adaptations, all with direct relevance to society, using various theatrical forms to ventilate local, national and international issues. It has provided training and curriculum development, organized theater programs and facilitated networking, helped form hundreds of drama groups in schools, parishes, communities, regions, and even overseas—through thousands of workshops and lectures given throughout the Philippine archipelago.

PETA has "popularized the use of theater as a potent and dynamic vehicle for the people's education, in raising awareness and consciousness of their condition, needs and aspirations. It has developed...out-of-school education through popular theater, and provided the artistic training needs of various people's organizations" (PETA, 1994).

This is done through the Kalinangan Ensemble (KE), PETA's main performance group; the School of People's Theater (SPT), its training arm, which conducts workshops and includes the Women's Theater Collective (WTC) which advocates gender sensitivity and women's issues; Theater in Education (TIE),

the alternative education program for young people, which is composed of the Children's Theater Collective (CTC) and the Metropolitan Teen Theater League (MITL); the People's Theater Resource Center (PTRC) which has charge of research, documentation, library and publications. All units fall under the supervision of the Dramatic Arts Center (DAC), the organizational core of PETA.

In years of interaction, international tours, and interactive workshops (North America, Europe and Asia), PETA has built an international network of theater groups, funding agencies and solidarity groups. The play *DH* (Domestic Helper) by Al Santos, presented in Hong Kong, the U.S., Canada and Europe, linked it to Filipinos living abroad. It is affiliated with national and international groups: People in Communication (PIC), World Association of Christians in Communications (WACC), International Association of Theater for Children and Young People (ASSITEJ), International Drama/Theater and Education Association (IDEA) and the Asia-Pacific Theater Forum (APTIF).

In 1996, its 30th anniversary, PETA plans to launch an Institute of People's Theater (IPT), a multi-purpose training and learning center for people's culture, to benefit the performing arts and related disciplines. It will offer "degree and non-degree courses in various fields and aspects of People's Theater and Culture, including the Broadcast Arts."

PETA's performance base is the Dulaang Raha Sulayman in Intramuros—the shell of the Spanish garrison in the old Walled City. From its first memorable presentation within

those walls (*Bayaning Huwad*, 1967) to today, it has chalked up a pride of performances—representing constant, back-breaking fund-raising. This used to mean begging for each theater season—depending on steady sponsors such as Jaime Zobel and Teodoro Valencia; friends and relatives and corporate allies of all dimensions; ticket-buyers ranging from tourists and visiting drama-lovers to school groups and the wealthy, as well as to busloads from the provinces and walk-ins from the park.

Today PETA operates on a budget of about P 1m yearly, much of it from JCCO, a Dutch Foundation, as well as from such foundations as: KULU-Women in Development; EMW, Hamburg; Terre des Hommes, Germany; and some local Philippine donors.

These funds provide operating expenses, which include the salaries of the management team, administrative expenses and the training of artists. The productions generate production expenses through a scheme of: Season Sponsors, whose names are printed in all posters and programs for a full season; Show Sponsors; Co-Presenters; Sponsors; Benefactors; Exchange Deal Partners; Poster Advertisers; Playbill Advertisers and Group Sales.

PETA survives by keeping expenses as low as possible. The Management Committee, for example, are paid salaries at what Beng Santos-Cabangon, Executive Director, describes as "NGO rates"—those paid by non-government organizations with some funding, ranging from P 4000 (minimum wage) to P 9000. Honoraria for actors are modest, and Mario O' Hara, for example, film actor/director and star of *Faust*, donated 50% of his honorarium, saying "I make my money elsewhere." Fritz Bennewitz, an old PETA friend who has directed many of their

Brecht plays, refused payment. Actors are paid per show (P 50 to P 400 daily for two weeks before and including show days) and provided food and transportation.

The PETA shows compose a diversified program. In each season they try to present a show that will be a "commercial" success—because it features a film star. Film star Nora Aunor in *DH* (two seasons, 24 performances), for example, paid for the whole season, and enabled PETA to recover 300% of expenses. The 1995 "commercial" play may be one on the Revolution of 1896, starring singing star Ariel Rivera. Film actors perform for PETA for very little or for free, in return for the training and the prestige.

Workshops around the country, in rural and urban settings, in NGOs, GOs, schools and the like, continue (two teachers at P 2500 a day generally) at socialized prices.

PETA survives because of foreign recognition and thus funding, local recognition and thus patronage, and especially a vision kept whole even today. Its members and participants, even though salaried or given honoraria and allowances, are still largely the volunteers they were at the beginning, ready to work for love of theater and for the dream of development and national identity. They each do "commitment performances" and "commitment workshops"—for love, to keep the faith. Now they perform not only for self-expression, or even only against Martial Law and Dictatorship (PETA was undoubtedly one of the major awareness-raisers during the Marcos era), but for their country and their people.

*The Cultural Center of the Philippines
Coordinating Center for Dramatic Arts.*

The resident theater company of the CCP is Tanghalang Pilipino, which presents a yearly season of original Filipino plays, and foreign plays in translation. It is backed by a subsidy from the CCP (formerly P 1.2m, now in hard times P 800,000), a Foundation and a Board of Trustees that help raise additional funds from the business sector, and some corporate sponsors, such as PLDT (Philippine Long Distance Telephone Company).

It includes the first Actors' Company in the country—professional actors who get total training, who act as the TP repertory company, taking large and small roles, and who get salaries from the PLDT sponsorship. Ticket sales provide a minimal input, since the plays barely break even, more often taking a loss, because of high production costs. Only musicals such as *Walang Sugat* and *El Filibusterismo* usually make a profit.

The CCDA gives production grants to groups outside the CCP. Formerly, from a fund of P 1.2m to 1.5m, it could give 8–10 groups P 50,000 each, but that fund has been drastically reduced because of reduced income. (The CCP receives no subsidy from the national government, but subsists on revenue from its property). It also provides Venue Grants (discounts on rental) and Artistic Support Services, such as sending travelling groups to the provinces or trainors to communities (as they did for the *Silay*

sarswela). The CCP provides honoraria, the communities fund travel, living expenses, and materials.

The CCP Tanghalang Pilipino provides steady theater fare to local students and other audiences, and most especially, for theater artists, a chance for training, for developing theater material, for experimenting with theater techniques, for interacting with foreign artists and directors. The repertory company was conceived as a model of professionalism and theater art to which artists and groups might aspire. As such, it is supported by government and other funds, and in turn supports other artists and groups.

Beyond training and performances, however, the CCP has provided a signal service to theater, in its outreach to provincial groups through arts councils, seminars, workshops, and especially the national and regional theater conferences and festivals. This is done in cooperation with the National Commission for Culture and the Arts—the NCCA, created in April 1992 by Republic Act 7356, which mandates state institutional support for artistic and cultural work in support of the search for national identity. Fortunately, Fernando Josef, Director of the CCDA, is also Chairman of the NCCA National Committee for Dramatic Arts, and there is thus a fusion of vision.

For the annual Dramatic Arts Congresses (1992-94), and for *Unang Tagpo*, the First National Theater Festival, Josef and his staff travelled throughout the country identifying, observing, discoursing with, training, advising theater groups, and helping them form networks. *Unang Tagpo* brought together nine provincial and seven Metro Manila groups to

perform, and to engage in critical and constructive discourse. There were performances, a conference, workshops, exhibits, and special events—an invaluable experience and understanding of theater within the national context.

The congresses gathered and analyzed experiences and problems, and planned forward. This year, the first regional festival was held: Mindulani, in Butuan City, Agusan del Sur, Mindanao, with three major presentations: *Mga Kuwentong Maranao* by the Sining Kambayoka of the Mindanao State University in Marawi; *Lawig Balanghail* by the Dula Agus Ensemble of Butuan; and *Oya Arakan* by the Kaliwat Theater Collective. The performances, workshops, and discussions focused on the question of ancestral domain or cultural sanctuary, concerns and problems shared by Mindanao peoples. The festival will be replicated in Iligan City in April 1995, to be followed by a Visayan festival later in the year, the Second National Theater Festival in February 1996, an Asian Theater Conference in 1997, and the First International Theater Festival in 1998. In between, a National Theater Directory will be published, regional consultations held, and annual congresses called.

The end-dream of all this activity—of Nanding Josef, theater person, and of the CCP-CCDA, and the NCCA-NCAD—is a People's Academy of Philippine Theater, envisioned as: "A liberating theater that recognizes and respects cultural diversity among Filipinos towards enriching the national identity."

Concretely, it will develop "a national dramatic arts program that will respond to the needs of the theater community." This

includes the following objectives:

1. To develop socially committed and highly skilled Filipino theater artist-teacher-cultural workers;
2. To implement a wholistic program of theater work in the Philippines (philosophy, aesthetics, pedagogy, research, etc.);
3. To undertake and sustain an audience development program for Philippine theater;
4. To mobilize institutional support and cooperation for Philippine theater;
5. To provide the necessary infrastructure, facilities, equipment, teaching tools and materials, etc., for the national and regional centers; and
6. To promote peace, freedom and international understanding through theater and cultural work. (CCDA, 1992, 1993; Josef, 1994)

The research, consultations, congresses, regional and national and international festivals, the networking and interactions, the dialogues and discourses, will all lead to this academy, towards which concrete steps are being taken. The dream may be costly: Jose calculates \$300m for the organization and infrastructure, to be sourced from foundations and sponsorships. It will require cooperation among government entities, non-government agencies, theater groups, artists, and pedagogues. It may assume NGO form. It is the major objective of the CCP-CCDA Six-Year Program, supported by the NCCA.

All that Philippine theater artists, practitioners, administrators and planners have learned from experience, from Asian and other partners, from seminars and conferences, will go into it, along with the hope that its services may benefit

Philippine theater and its neighbors.

In conclusion, the Philippine experience can be summarized to indicate the contours of the economy of culture. The CCP-CCDA has registered 339 theater groups all over the country (89 in the National Capital Region, 103 in Luzon, 65 in the Visayas, and 82 in Mindanao). There are many more who have not been registered, contacted, recognized, or even heard of. Our cumulative experience thus ranges through hundreds of theater groups represented by the following cases:

1. *An Balangaw*, which independently pursues its vision of Leyte culture without any help from institutions, living out of its own pockets and on the support of small Leyte communities.

2. *The Silay Sarswela*, which derives from a tradition, has a link to and support from the local government, but is alive because of the *barangay* /community from which it draws its plays, its performers, and its spirit.

3. *The Dagyaw Theater and Dance Company*, a high school group funded by the school and by sponsors from government and the community who recognize its service to community, region and nation through culture.

4. *The Kaliwat Theater Collective*, which has done what many theater groups dream of doing: interact with a cultural community, giving to it and learning from it in mutual enrichment, networking with it and other groups national and international, linking and communicating in a growth of national consciousness.

5. *PETA, the Philippine Educational Theater Association*, the oldest of the groups, which has grown from a small group performing Filipino and foreign plays in search of understanding of and insight into Philippine society, to a performing/training/teaching/networking/bonding/interactive organization with foreign and local recognition, support and importance.

6. *The Cultural Center of the Philippines Coordinating Center for the Dramatic Arts*, which encourages and enhances performance and related skills through its Tanghalang Pilipino repertory company and Actor's Company, and especially draws together theater groups throughout the country with the support of the NCCA, in consultations and discourse leading to regional and national bonding, and eventually an Academy of Philippine Theater that will benefit the country and its Asian neighbors.

In between these are the hundreds of other groups doing their work, facing their audiences, consciously or unconsciously contributing to this bonding and this vision of theater for a more humane life. The Philippines, it is well known, does not have a rosy economic picture. Josef, in a speech at the Asian Theater Summit in Toyama, Japan, in October 1994, quoted Senator Leticia Shahani: "Our country, the Philippines, is a sick nation gravely afflicted with interlocking diseases of poverty, passivity, graft and corruption, exploitative patronage, factionalism, political instability, lack of discipline and lack of patriotism."

The bleak picture is real, but not unrelievedly bleak, or totally true. Theater though impoverished is active, potent, healthy, and committed to the nation. All those theater groups are surviving through funding strategies basal and sophisticated, simple and complex, difficult and perhaps desperate, but always creative and imaginative. The funds are never enough, and potential sponsors often refuse aid, not seeing theater as part of what Josef calls "the crusade against poverty, graft and corruption and moral degradation." To the uninformed, culture is a frill, a decoration, a luxury.

However, the fact that the theater groups persist and survive, means that they feel and manifest urgency, and somehow get the money they need—from ticket sales, to An Balangaw's P 5000 from a town fiesta, to Kaliwat and PETA's millions from foundations. This means that the cultural economy supports them, albeit with difficulty. It is not easy, but it is possible, and it is done. These groups, their audiences and their sponsors know that culture is a necessity, enabling selfhood, regional cooperation, and a national vision.

The performances gather cultural material, process and share it, and thus enable individual, community, regional and national understanding. In this venture the performing group is partner to schools, writers, teachers, thinkers, researchers, advocates of nationhood, artists expressing the national ethos.

Only by retrieving the past, the Philippine experience shows, can there be a future. Only with cultural action can there be development, and only with cultural interaction can there be identity and unity. The health of the cultural economy is the health of the country.

The cultural economy enables nationhood.

NOTE

1. The *zarzuela* is the Spanish musical play; the *sarswela* identifies its indigenization in the Philippines with local themes, languages, and music. The distinction is made because both Spanish and Philippine plays figure in Philippine theater history.