

# Culture and the Philippine Struggle for Independence



Teaching history, and teaching Revolution(s), have several purposes. The first would be informational — to tell the students: here are events that loom large and rise high in the flow of our history; these are the people who shaped them; these are the events that led up to, and that led away from them; the 1896 revolution was the first breakaway from a colonial regime in Asia; the 1986 revolution was the first overthrow of a dictatorship in Asia; the many smaller peasant revolts in between were unignorable islands in the stream of struggle.

The second purpose would be interpretative, the “WHY” and “SO WHAT” questions after the WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, and HOW. It is to invite the students to consider: What is the significance of all this? What does it mean? what do these events say about the Filipino? what do they say to us, so that we can better understand ourselves as a people, and our potential as a nation? What do they say to others, to the world outside? Why, as the newspapers, the Senators, the teachers and students, the man on the street, ask these days, why are things still not going right, after the miraculous days in February 1986 on EDSA? what have revolutions done to our history, to our lives, to our future as a people and as a nation?

I have taught history only once in my life, and am no authority on its teaching, but as a teacher of literature, and a researcher in cultural history, I have drawn much understanding and insight from considering history “from within,” so to speak, as text needing interpretation, as discourse that tells us many things if we read it closely and analytically, not just for the people and events, but for the signs and the meanings.

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So how then do we “read” Revolution? There are many ways, and I am here today to consider one of them: reading Revolution and Struggle as culture. Or rather, examining the culture that led the Filipino to revolution, and thus gaining some understanding not only of why we struggled and how we struggled, but of why we managed our revolts the way we did. I believe that the Philippine Struggle for independence is not made up only of the big events — 1896 and 1986 — but definitely also of the smaller events in between and the people behind them — peasant uprising, easily-quashed rebellion, millenarian movement; Sakdal as well as Lapiang Malaya; Dagohoy and *juramentado*; seditious playwright Aurelio Tolentino and General Artemio Ricarte.

What then is the culture behind our struggle?

Our basic culture was shaped by the way we lived — and therefore felt, thought, acted, coped. For most of our history, we have been a land-dependent people. Whether as forest foragers or hunters, then as *kaingineros*, then as settled farmers and fishermen we drew our living from the land. In the small forest groupings, and especially in the riverine settlements of our early history, we functioned within groups — as communities — because that was the structure of survival. Together we fought the enemy — the warriors of mother tribe, the vagaries of climate and geography, as well as the spirits and *anitos* who had to be appeased so that they would allow good harvests, victory in battle, recovery from illness, fertile marriages, peaceful journeys to the land of the dead, etc.

A people who live off the land and the waters — and a great percentage of our people still do live this way — become almost as bound to each other as to the land. Why? Because although farming and fishing can be solitary enterprises — a fishermen goes out on a boat alone with his lamp and his net; a farmer plows his field with only his carabao for help — they also depend on help from within the community. Townspeople move from one field to another, helping the farmer who must get his plowing or planting done that day — then move on to help someone else. They help with the house that has to be moved, the roof that must be finished before the rains come. They help pull in the loaded fishing net. And when there is an illness, a birth, a death, a wedding — the neighbors are the “bank” one draws

on, the resource one leans on. Their help can be presumed and expected, because it is reciprocally necessary.

In the traditional Philippine agricultural or fishing community, therefore, one's resources consist of one's family and neighbors. In these communities, no one has too many resources of any other kind — no fat bank accounts; no letters of credit; no loans, mortgages, endowment plans or insurance policies; no foreign or time deposits; no private army; no friends in high places — none of the resources on which the urbanite has learned to depend. Our resources are people, each other. Our families will support us through school, work, problems, marriage, danger, even brushes with the law. Our community — neighbors, *compadres*, fellow farmers or fishermen, in-laws, former classmates and co-workers, etc. — will help us with work, problems, support.

This is why *pakikisama* came about. We need to help each other, and we need each other's help, and so we have to relate to each other in a way that will not strain the fabric of the relationship. This is why we speak indirectly and non-verbally, because to confront is to risk offending someone on whom we may have to depend someday, or from whom we will need help. This is why we use euphemisms, why we do not refuse when invited to become *ninong* or *ninang*, why we send gifts, why we open our doors to all during fiestas, why every *binyag*, *kasal*, graduation, death, etc. has to have a *handa*; why we are so hospitable. This is why we are reluctant to say "No" directly, but depend on *pakiramdaman* to make our meaning clear. This is why we have *compadrazgo* to the nth degree — *ninong* and *ninang* in multiples *sa binyag*, *sa kasal*, *sa damit* (in the *sinakulo* or *komedya*) — because these ritual relationships enlarge and enrich our support systems, make our family and community grow in different directions. We need to get along with our community, however we define it — barrio, town, neighborhood, workplace. Our culture did not shape us into loners, rugged individualists, or solitary workers. We do not even have words for these in our languages.

That is one way in which our culture shapes the way we work, the way we relate to people, the way we celebrate, the way we manage our lives.

The above can certainly explain aspects of our struggle. For example, how is such a group as the Lapiang Malaya formed? Although

it had a leader, Valentin de los Santos, called Tatang, I would venture to say that the group did not so much form around a charismatic leader, as groups do in other cultures — the Mooneys, for example — as gather because of a common need: a hunger for land, a gnawing poverty, a longtime oppression. A common need bred a commonality that made a community — people with the same needs and aspirations, as articulated by Tatang.

Although the Katipunan had an ideology beyond just neighborliness and aspirations that went beyond family and immediate community to province, region, and nation, it was what one might call a community that evolved. Recruitment started out among friends and acquaintances, rather than as a call to a cause. Groupings and activities, loyalties and organization, were based on family and community structures. From the base, the movement and the struggle grew and evolved

To return to our earlier question, or to a variant: Can culture explain the spirit and methods of a revolution? It certainly can. The Spaniards had called the Filipino indolent, stolid as a carabao, without much “*potencia intelectual*” — the suggestion being that he did not have the spirit or the will to fight back against the Spaniards, much less stage a revolution. And yet he did — the first one among the colonized countries of Asia.

What was it that finally stirred the quiet acquiescence of 300 years? First, perhaps, there was the sense of a larger community. When the Filipino people had been regionally separate, only concerned with their individual villages, communal problems and even Spanish oppression were borne as burdens of individual communities. But when Rizal, del Pilar, Mabini, Bonifacio, playwrights like Aurelio Tolentino, and others began to be heard outside their own regions, there stirred a sense of shared suffering, a feeling that the community stretched beyond barrio boundaries. *Pakikisama* extended its scope and reach, the Katipunan confirmed a kind of ritual kinship — and the Filipino, feeling what was a sense of country and nation for the first time, fought back.

And how he fought! — with spears and *bolos* and a few guns, with few resources, but with no fear. Not having resources was something his culture had accustomed him to; he could manage that as long as he had his community and his leaders (respected elders) with him.

When that effort was vitiated by the entry of the American colonizers, he changed tactics and took to the hills. The determination and bravery of the *insurrectos*, of Gregorio del Pilar, of Artemio Ricarte, of the unnamed soldiers whom even the Americans, their enemies, grudgingly praised — through hunger and treachery and no guns — was that of the Filipino fighting for his community.

When he was defeated by superior arms, an insular government, and tactics of force and repression, the Filipino still fought on — through the indirect means that his culture had given him. He staged “seditious” plays that looked like romantic dramas or zarzuelas, but spoke of protest and revolt. The plays of Juan Abad, Aurelio Tolentino, and others, are of the fabric of our culture. They speak of love between man and woman — Liwanag and Kaulayaw. But, as with the way we say no or yes, they say more than they seem to, speaking of nationhood and independence in the language of indirection and metaphor.

These plays not only spoke directly of a love for freedom, of a concern for Inang Bayan and countrymen, their staging also showed the lengths a Filipino could go to for this love and concern. The plays were often shut down by the military, and the authors, actors, and sometimes the audience, were hauled off to jail. The writers simply wrote on, and staged other plays when released. Arthur Riggs, an American naval commander of the era, although he called the Filipinos “natives” given to “savagery and barbarism,” writes of his grudging admiration for stage managers who, with no machinery, lights, tools, money or credit, put on play after play as their part in the struggle. He notes, at the end of his manuscript:

It is difficult for Americans to conceive of dramas to see which they would risk arrest, jeopardize their personal safety from bodily harm, and which, when seen, would stir them to such a pitch of indignation and enthusiasm that they could leave the theatre full of purpose against the government and its emissaries. It is also difficult to conceive of our own feelings were we placed as the Filipinos are.

Riggs thus says that Americans would probably not risk arrest for patriotic plays. He is in effect saying that their culture would not cause them to do this, to act this way — perhaps because although the American responds to a call to battle, these little efforts of struggle would not draw him. But it draws the Filipino, whose culture is full of

little efforts, little community enterprises (from komedya to processions) that mean much to him because they confirm his place in the community.

A little relevant digression from revolution: one of the accusations hurled by foreigners and Filipinos alike at us, at our national character, is that we “think family,” or “think regional” rather than “think national.” A colleague, for example, complains that someone who envied her whispered in the ears of authority, and she was refused permission to go to a conference. The envious one was not thinking of the good of the university, or indeed of the Philippines, but of her personal envy for one who was not in her own inner circle. This my colleague called “the tendency of Filipinos to pull each other down” rather than boost each other up — the *talangka* syndrome, it has been called.

This is true; it happens often. But this is, I think, one of those national characteristics that come from our culture and that, properly interpreted and guided, could be turned around and made asset rather than defect. The culture we have been talking about — community-based, strong in *pakikisama*, also creates the outsider, the non-member of the community. The culture defines our circle as *tayo*, and the others outside it as *kayo*, as *ibang tao*. Thus the Filipino’s first loyalty is to his family. But if someone outside his hometown challenges his loyalty, he expresses it not only for his family but for his townmates. If he faces someone from another province, he defines himself and his loyalties as belonging to his province. And when he is abroad, he does not define himself as belonging to a clan, town or province, but as a Filipino.

What does this mean? It means that his community is elastic, it stretches depending on the source of a threat that makes him look around and think what community it is to which he owes loyalty, and which will give him support. It is said that France did not become a nation till quite recently, since through most of its history parts of it had belonged to other countries (e.g. Germany) or kings, spoke different languages, had different loyalties. One can say that even though the Spaniards had instituted a governmental structure, the Philippines before 1896 was not a nation, but a gathering of communities — barrios, towns, provinces. Individual people had their loyalties pegged to communities — as small as families, all the way to

as large as the nation — depending on their perception of community. What forged this gathering into a nation? An outside enemy perceived as such — the Spaniards in 1896 (the perception evolved through those 300 years, thanks especially to the Propagandists and Rizal); the Americans right after. It is analogous to the Silaynon realizing his loyalty to hometown when faced by Bacolodnon; the Negrense defining himself as Negrense when confronted by a Capiznon; the Pinoy in the US proud to be Pinoy, because faced by Americans.

If, therefore, we want the Pinoy to think national, then we have to make him realize what his community is, and what are its enemies. This way he won't think that he only has to defend his little turf, his family and his community, but realize that his struggle is for the big domain, the nation. We still have not managed to convey this to all Filipinos; that is why people are partially correct when they say we are not yet a nation, because we think small, we don't "think national."

The February 1986 revolution has been the subject of many books and essays, many of them speaking of its uniqueness — the visiting saints, the nuns stopping tanks, the mix of young and old, rich and poor, the soldiers who refused to shoot. What are its cultural underpinnings? It will probably be the subject of cultural analysis for a long time to come. As a beginning, let us focus on a couple of cultural factors that were immediately visible in February.

First of all, many have commented that women seemed to outnumber the men at EDSA, and in some cases were more reckless than their husbands. In the book *People Power*; there are accounts of husbands holding back, worrying about safety, not wishing to take their children with them to EDSA. And there are accounts of women arguing against this prudent behavior, insisting on being involved, taking their children with them into the crowd, into the possible danger. Why? At a show immediately after the revolution, Randy David said that he thought it was because many of the women there were mothers, and therefore thinking as mothers about the future of their children in this country. I think that they were indeed there as mothers, but also as wives, as citizens, and as individual courageous people.

Some reasons for this can be found in Philippine culture. In our culture, observe the way women are trained. From childhood, society expects girls to be good, to help mother, to keep their rooms and

persons neat, to learn the tasks of womanhood. Why? Because they are the keepers of virtue, the repositories of the family's *diwa*, or spirit. Of men, on the other hand, society expects macho ruggedness, mischief, play. Why? Because they are the future warriors and providers. Boys are not expected to do chores, but to play outside, get dirty, and return home to be ministered to, coddled and taken care of by their mothers, sisters, aunts, grandmothers.

When they grow up, they are expected to become providers and community figures, but not to be responsible for keeping discipline or inculcating virtue in the home. Women are expected not only to remain virtuous (the society that condones men's having *queridas* condemns the fallen woman promptly and forever), but to teach morality, good behavior, and values to their children; to preserve the sanctity of the home; to be total supports to their husbands; all the while running the house and raising the children in an exemplary manner — no matter what other jobs they might hold outside the house — corporation president or *labandera*; professor or factory worker.

Thus, when Filipinos grow up, they are expected to function on many tracks. Women in the rural areas and in the laboring classes hold their own in the task or survival — plowing fields, tending work animals, doing piecework in the home, working in factories — while they tend house, husband and children. Philippine society allows middle- and upper-class wives to take on jobs outside the home, but prefers that they stay close to the home, e.g. in family ventures, in home industries or businesses, as treasurers of family corporations, as backstops to their husbands or fathers. However, even if after professional training they become bank presidents, medical doctors, professors, or computer experts, they are still judged first by how their homes are kept and how their children are brought up. Woman may and do run multi-million peso corporations; yet they are still responsible for being sure that there is *patis* on the table, and that the children get their homework done. They are expected to perform and excel on all fronts simultaneously and equally — as housekeepers, wives, mothers, workers and professionals. And, more recently, as militant citizens participating in rallies, in campaigns against graft, at EDSA, in government, as President.



As a result, the culture produces strong women who can function on many tracks, simultaneously running homes and enterprises, molding children and shaping the family, giving their husbands total support while participating actively in society. Men function well in the field and in the marketplace, but are often felled by the common cold, by household problems, by children's crises. Our women are naturals for a revolution.

Women fought in the peasant revolts, in the 1896 revolution, at EDSA. At the latter, it was not only their strength as individuals that drew them there, but also their multiple roles. They were there as part of the community, as concerned persons, as committed and involved citizens, as wives alongside their husbands, and as mothers preserving the world for their children. They were functioning on all the fronts on which our culture expects them to function.

What brought people to EDSA in such large numbers? First, there was Butz Aquino's call to his group, and then that of Cardinal Sin to his flock. In each case, the call was to a communal grouping. Bandila, Atom, and other cause-oriented groups are each a political *barkada* or community. Even when an individual is reluctant to respond to a can, he gains strength not usually from ideology, but from the fact that his *kasama* are going too, and he is impelled into action by the call of the group, the need of the community. It is not only *pakikisama*, but also *atin ito, magtulungan tayo, magkapit-bisig tayo* — just as in the rural tribal, then agricultural communities.

The church is a larger communal grouping — bound not only by *pakikisama* and sharing, but by the dimension of faith. In the old days, faith reposed in the neighbor, the *datu*, later the *patron*, the landlord — who would come through with help in life's crises. Now the faith is elevated, higher, firmer, because it fastens on the leader-churchman, Cardinal Sin, on the strength of the Church, and the power and mercy of God.

When all these people came together, and rich and poor, male and female, young and old, student and businessman, housewife and nun, saw each other there, together — sharing food, saying the rosary, lying on cardboard on the pavements, keeping vigil, stopping tanks — they lost their individual fear. This was not only a sense of community, this was actual community, actually jostled, touched, prayed with. This was *pakikisama* expanded, in the flesh, actual. Right

there were people one could count on — *compadres*, relatives, *inaanak*, *barkada*, *kasama*. They were beside one, talking, praying, linking arms, facing teargas and tanks with one, handing over a sandwich or a drink, asking one to pass the food over the Camp Aguinaldo or Channel 4 fence, not noticing who was wearing rubber slippers and who Christian Dior shoes, or who brought a coolerful of drinks in the trunk of a Toyota, or who only had a bag of peanuts.

It was this same cultural perception that made the soldiers find it impossible to shoot at the civilians, even when they had their orders, and their jobs and training required it. The civilians did not plead with the soldiers to change allegiance, to forget their orders, to reject a dictator. Instead they reminded the men in uniform of their brotherhood, of their being members of the same community. That is what made the soldiers shed tears, and what gave them the strength to refuse to obey military orders. The people thus called on the same motives that make farmers and peasants reluctant to confront, anger, offend, or hurt. In this case, the soldier, recalling mothers and relatives, home and community, could not shoot or kill.

Philippine culture, as we said, has not created the rugged individualist and independent loner that some Western cultures have made among their people. Our culture has made us find our strength and meaning in our communities, and EDSA was a community. Those who said that it was “only Manila” were wrong; EDSA was in those days the whole Philippines, linked by electronic media, spirit, and sense of community. EDSA has been called a miracle, a once-in-a-lifetime phenomenon. It was, along with all that, a culturally-determined experience.

Although I have not made a full cultural analysis of the Filipino struggle for independence through history, I hope I have suggested some ideas that may explain how our struggle has been an expression of our culture. Our culture gave us the strength and the motive to fight oppression in our peasant revolts, in our revolution against Spain, in the Philippine-American war, in seditious dramas and millenarian movements, in anti-Marcos efforts in the countryside and abroad, in the EDSA event that threw out a dictator and installed a woman president.

That culture was shaped in the agricultural and riverine communities of our past. It developed such values as *pakikisama* and

*pakikipagkapwatao*, which shaped ways of behavior. These mores and manners impelled us to voice our protests in our own way, and to manage our rebellions and revolutions in what other people may think a strange way — bringing in our household saints, our families, our *baon*, our feeling for community. Some called it “Revolution as Fiesta.” Indeed it was, because the same cultural qualities, motives and values inform our fiestas and our revolutions. Culture is not, of course, the sole explanation for our ways of struggle and reasons for revolution, but it is a light-giving explanation.

How does this affect us as teachers? Aside from increasing our own understanding of history as experience and discourse, perhaps we can use it to present, explain, and interpret history for our students. Using culture might possibly present the personalities, events, and their sequence as motivated flow, rather than as separate dates and actions. Students might be led to understand that events have a shape, history has patterns, a people have a personality that evolved through their particular time and place. Explaining to students why Filipinos behave as they do, might not only make them understand a historical situation, but also themselves as part of the same culture. It might even make them depreciate themselves less, decry the Filipino less, ask less questions about “Why are Filipinos like that?” (namely not like Americans). It might even make them prouder of a culture that brought about the first revolution against colonization, and the first bloodless revolution. It might make them understand that the reason we still have problems continuing and unsolved, is that the culture needs to adjust and grow. It might make them as well proud that they are Filipinos who evolved from the past, though fire and struggle; into the troubled but still hopeful present. ↪