

REFLECTIONS OF THE NATIONAL IDEA IN THE LITERATURE AND ART OF THE PHILIPPINES*

V. A. Makarenko

Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow

The study of the National Idea in historical development and the cultural process of different regions, especially of ex-colonial countries, has become an important subject of recent research. The First Conference of the European Association for Southeast Asian Studies (EUROSEAS) on "Keys to Southeast Asia" held in Leiden, the Netherlands on June 29 to July 1, 1995 included this theme. The "Nusantara" Seminar in Moscow developed this theme further and some participants of the Leiden Conference also presented their papers there.

1. The more general expression of the National Idea through the formula "One Country - One Nation - One Language" (or One Culture, One Art, etc.) defines the main directions and trends in the study of the historical and cultural processes in the origin, formation, and development of the national and cultural consciousness especially in the former colonial countries of South and Southeast Asia (SSEA).

The problems of national language, national culture, and national art are part of the conception of the National Idea, on the one hand, and express the National Idea by their own means, on the other. This cultural reflection is sometimes deeper and fuller than some political declarations and state laws.

The Philippines is a classical example of a former colonial country. This multilingual and multicultural country has experienced various influences of foreign culture — Chinese, Indian, Arabic, European (especially Hispanic), and American. The Philippines is the only Christian (mainly Roman Catholic) country in Asia, but it has a very active and expansive Muslim minority (about 5%). The Filipinos have kept some remnants of ancient paganism in their modern religions (for example, the Tadtarin and St. John festival, etc.).

"Halu-halo" is a Tagalog (and Cebuano) word that means mixture. While it describes a popular national dessert made of crushed ice and assorted sweetened fruits and milk and sugar, it could also describe the Filipino people. They look like Asians, they speak and write English like Americans, worship like Spaniards, and have an outlook that is international. This diversity makes Filipinos all the more interesting. They are proud of their cosmopolitan cities but love to head for the provinces to escape city life. A mixture of tradition and modernity and a diversity of art and culture typify the Philippines of our time.

2. The language problem of the Philippines, a determinant in the development of national art and culture, is not so acute as in some contiguous countries of "Nusantara" and SSEA. The official or national language of the Philippines is Filipino, based on Tagalog, which played a consolidating role in Luzon in pre-colonial and colonial times. This language is very close linguistically to many other Philippine languages. More than half of the Philippine population knows this language. English is a second official language and is known on a larger scale, 60 or 70%. These two, therefore, are the main languages among the 120 languages and dialects of the Philippine archipelago.

Everybody in the Philippines is for the national culture, and the national language is used in the public life of the country. But public official life generally uses English. Most business, government, legal, transport, and service transactions are conducted in English. In 1996, in Metro Manila, we couldn't purchase even one guidebook on the Philippines in Filipino — only in English (and occasionally, in Spanish and German). But one can freely find such a book not only in English but in Chinese and Malay in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore.

Philippine literature in English exceeds literature in Tagalog and other Philippine languages in quantity and, in my opinion, also in quality. More than 40 Philippine dailies (with more than 3 million copies) are published mainly in English.

All geographical names, toponyms, and microtoponyms in the Philippines are mainly in Spanish and English, though in the South more local names make an appearance.

Not only the National Idea, but the image of the human being, is reflected in the mirror of language and culture. A people's ethical, philosophical, and cultural notions are expressed in their language.

3. To me, modern literature in English, though it seems strange on the face of it, represents the National Idea to an even greater degree than literature in the local languages. Philippine literature in Spanish during the Spanish colonial period represented the origin and formation of the Filipino national consciousness, especially in Rizal's writings. Tagalog and other Philippine literature is more ethnographic, descriptive (poems and comedies by Francisco Balagtas, Tagalog novels *Mga Ibong Mandaragit* "Birds or Prey" and *Luhang Buwaya* "Crocodile Tears" by Amado V. Hernandez). Revolting against literary convention, Hernandez stripped Tagalog of its ornate character and wrote prose closer to the colloquial than the "official" style permitted. In his hands, Tagalog became a malleable instrument and an efficient vehicle for the expression of complex ideas.

Some Philippine scholars have divided Filipino writers in English into two groups. The first group is composed of those who try to preserve the cultural heritage of the colonial period, like Nick Joaquin, Francisco Arcellana, Alfredo Yuson, etc. The second group is composed of those who refuse this heritage, like F. Sionil Jose, Edilberto and Edith Tiempo, Erwin Castillo, etc.

For purposes of this seminar, we can present very briefly some aspects of the National Idea in Philippine literature and art in the creative works of their best representatives.

Nickomedes (Nick) Marquez Joaquin (b. 1917) chose as the "through theme" of his early short stories the interconditionality and interpenetration of elements of national autochthonal and Western cultures, ancient Filipino paganism and Roman Catholicism. In "The Summer Solstice" (1952), he presents a very popular Christian religious feast dedicated to St. John the Baptist and to the ancient Filipino pagan goddess of fertility, Tadtarin. The Tadtarin feast revolves around the woman possessed by the spirit of this goddess. While the feast of St. John the Baptist is celebrated with a staid Christian procession during daytime, Tadtarin is celebrated in the wild summer night.

In a later short story "The Order of Melkizedek" (1966), Nick Joaquin demonstrates the links of Philippine folk Catholicism to Philippine nationalism. The Biblical prophet and priest in the image of Fr. Melchor presents the Western sun cult, but local priestesses and dancers ("baylan") present the Oriental moon cult.

The role of women in the development of Philippine culture and national identity is another Joaquin "through theme". The incarnation of the National Idea in woman images as a system is realized in Joaquin's novels. The first, *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* (1961), gives a symbol of the search for self, the search for one's roots and national identity. It uses a motif standard in Philippine nationalistic literature, connected with the mother goddess motif of fertility (*Inang Bayan* or "Motherland"). The Filipina-Spanish mestiza Connie is a metaphor of it, the cross-breeding considered by the author as a reflection of national and cultural problems.

The dualism of Philippine culture, spiritual history, and national identity (with their conflicts and contradictions) is demonstrated in Joaquin's second novel, *Caves and Shadows* (1983). It is dedicated to the nativist cult of the Ginoong Ina ("Honorable Mother") or to the neo-paganism presented in the image of the Filipino-American mestiza Nenita Coogan. Nick Joaquin depicts the Malayo-Spanish duality of Filipino nature, the battle of Asianization and Westernization, pre-Hispanic and Hispanic culture in Philippine history, which creates a tension in the Filipino psyche. He named this process the "apocalypse" in his article "Apocalypse and the Revolution" (in *Culture and History*, Manila: Solar Publishing Corp., 1988, p. 167). He sees in neo-paganism the basis for the "new truly Filipino, for genuine Philippine nationalism rooted in real native tradition" (for details, see articles by Prof. Thelma B. Kintanar of the University of the Philippines).

Francisco Sionil Jose (FSJ, b. 1924) has based his creative works on contemporary Philippine life, although he has made some use of legends and historical roots. He is the author of five collections of short stories and seven novels, including the widely-known "Rosales saga", on his native little town in Pangasinan province and his people, the Ilokanos. His novels include *The Pretenders* (1962), *Tree* (1978), *My Brother, My Executioner* (1979), *Mass* (1982), *Po-on* (1984). These books were published in reverse chronological order of the described events and developments. FSJ created the "Ilokano character" never reconciled to "foreign tyranny". The collision between the East and the West, according to the author, led the Filipino national consciousness to fatal results. He even termed it "to kill the Western father" in one of his articles, meaning to refuse the Western (Hispanic and American) heritage.

The tragedy of national identity in search of its own place in the past, the present, and the future is presented in FSJ's *Ermita* (1988). As a matter of fact, his last novel *Viajero* (Sp. "traveler", 1993) is also dedicated to the same problem, the perpetual migrations of Ilokanos and all Filipinos in historical and present times: the "eternal wayfarer" and the fortunes of the "Filipino diaspora" in the USA, the movement of Filipino workers to the Middle East, and the travails of Filipino women in Hong Kong, Singapore, Tokyo, etc.

An impressive bibliography of books and articles is dedicated to FSJ's literature of "spiritual liberation and the Filipino soul", including publications by Sahlan M. Saman of the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia ("The Reconstruction of History and Tradition in F. Sionil Jose's Novels and Short Stories", 1995; "A Comparative Study of the Malaysian and Philippine War Novels", 1984), and others. It should be noted that almost all the novels of Nick Joaquin and F. Sionil Jose have been translated into Russian.

Novels in English are read mainly by middle-class Filipinos, the educated who know literature from high school and college. They are a small but competent minority. The bigger majority read Philippine comics and magazines, especially in Filipino and other local languages.

4. Philippine art, especially stage art — theatrical, musical, cinematographic, variety, or show business — in general has the same specific features as Philippine literature. "Very English English" and "very Tagalog Tagalog" are used in some elite theaters and cinemas that are "not for all". Tagalog slang, gay language, *yaya* ("nursemaid") English, Taglish are used in mass art, in pop culture (cinema, showbiz, main stations/channels of Manila radio and TV). The elite part of Philippine art in English and Filipino is dedicated to the National Idea.

The staging of elite plays "not for all" is realized mainly by the Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA) at the Fort Santiago Rajah Sulayman Theater and by the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) with their studios and workshops in Metro Manila. We can consider as super-elite two original plays presented in Spanish till now: Jose Rizal's *Junto al Pasig* ("On the Bank of the Pasig" 1879) and Claro M. Recto's *Solo Bajo Las Sombras* ("One among the Shadows" 1917). According to the last census, only one percent of the Philippine population can understand Spanish now.

Philippine mass cinematography mainly in Filipino (Tagalog) has a vast audience. Filipino filmgoers prefer Philippine films of the Hollywood type; however, English-language film production is done to give Philippine films a chance to enter international film festivals. Some serious Filipino producers have made films on national identity even though fully aware of the fact that the films would not be commercially successful: *Ifugao* (1955 by Santiago), *Badjao* (1957 award-winning film by Avellana), *Itim* ("Black" by de Leon), *Menor de edad* ("Minor" by Bernal), and so on.

The Manila International Film Festival was organized with the ambitious aspirations of the Former First Lady and ex-Governor of Metro Manila, Imelda R. Marcos. A special Film Center was even constructed for it. As in India and some other Asian countries, movie performers and show business personalities with Caucasian faces and European complexion have gained more popularity than those with pure Filipino features, especially among the male actors.

The music of the Filipinos has its own specific features based on folk variants including TV and radio versions. Filipino music reflects ethnic and religious distinctions, as well as foreign influences, resulting in many hybrid vocal and instrumental forms. Old songs, including the Tagalog lyrico-dramatic *kundiman*, are the symbols of this national musical culture. The unique Philippine bamboo organ in Las Piñas, Metro Manila, built at the beginning of the last century by a Spanish priest, is now used for local and foreign music concerts. Even super-modern samples of Filipino pop and rock music show traces of Filipino cultural roots.

Music in Filipino movies, like sex in Filipino movies, rarely blends with the story. In many movies, the music uses bad sound equipment and shows poor musical direction. But some aspiring singers, like Rico J. Puno, Hajji Alejandro, Basil Valdez, Freddie Aguilar, Mike Hanopol, are very expressive in their art and are very popular as the bearers of the national soul. They have been winners in popular music festivals.

Jun Latonio, composer for the Mike de Leon movie *Kung Mangarap Ka't Magising* ("If you are dreaming and get awakened"), says:

We still don't have music that we can truly call Filipino. *Kundiman* is very Western in form and harmony; commercial music is not Filipino music. I want the Filipino audience to listen intelligently to music. There is a nationalistic effort now. Ours is to define what is ethnic, not avant-garde.

In the 50's, the style of Bobby Gonzales and the Tagalog rock-and-rollers was opposed to Ruben Tagalog's *kundimans*. The early 70s saw the upper and middle class searching for Filipino identity. However, in contemporary film, music, and show business, the many facets of Caucasian influence prevail. Movie and musical idols become Western. Filipinos call Rico J. Puno the "Philippine Caruso", Frankie Sionil Jose the "Philippine Dreiser", and Olongapo and Subic as the "Philippine Hong Kong".

In the 60s, the young snobs of the First Quarter Storm dreamed of working with the "real masses" at the same time that they dreamed of experiencing "free love" in the style of Jean Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir.

5. The contradictions and inconsistencies in national development and cultural policies in the Philippines are evident in the technical terms used in oral and written communication. The nationalistic aspirations for the use of the national language in the humanities in the 80s were shown in some experiments in college teaching and the publication of scientific journals in philology, history, sociology, or political science. Examples of these journals are *Malay* ("Consciousness", "Knowledge") and *Daloy* ("Flow") published by De La Salle University in Manila. In every issue of *Daloy*, a journal on language and on literary criticism, one can read a lot of foreign words like *artikulo*, *editor*, *konsultant*, *kopya*, *departamento*, *tomo*, and others. There are two or three borrowed words in almost every title of this journal, like *leksikograpiya*, *istandardisasyon*, *pilosopiya*, *sosyolohiya*, and *rebelde*. On the other hand, in the *Philippine Journal of Linguistics* published by the Linguistic Society of the Philippines, borrowed words are very seldom used in the articles written in Filipino, which, however, only rarely appear in its pages.

Modern versions of the Maria Clara, the traditional Filipina dress named after Rizal's heroine, now show European jackets and jeans. Comedies like *Mana-Mana* ("inheritance", "legacy") and albums produced by Viva Records are semi-European.

Official opposition to divorce and the practice of machismo and *kerida* (Sp. *querida* "loved", "beloved", equivalent to institutionalized marital unfaithfulness) shows inconsistencies too. Filipinos claim that they are "sober" people but most Filipino men know very well what *cuatro cantos* ("four corners") means — Philippine gin in a tetrahedral bottle with the image of Michael the Archangel on the label.

Philippine Independence was declared on July 4, 1946 but it is now celebrated every 12th of June (starting in 1970) to commemorate the proclamation of the First Philippine Republic in 1898. The Philippine Revolution of 1896-1899 was inspired by Jose Rizal and other heroes. The Filipinos have a strong maxim in the manner of the ancient Romans: "Rizal dixit ergo ita est", which means "If Rizal said it, so be it".

ENDNOTE

*Paper read at the International Seminar of the "Nusantara" Society in Moscow on National Development and Literary Process in Southeast Asia, June 24-28, 1996.