

“NATION’ AND ‘ART’’: WHY A “NATIONAL ARTIST”’?

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In dealing with an institution with a hazy historical beginning, it is best to introduce it as part of the pseudo-legendary origins of the Malakas-Maganda motif as Ferdinand Marcos and Imelda Romualdez had mythified their conjugal dictatorship during the Martial Law years from 1972 to 1986. With Marcos as the Strong Man controlling the politics and economy of the New Society, Imelda took the role of The Beautiful Woman in charge of cultural promotion. When painter Fernando Amorsolo was named the first National Artist in 1972, people took it for granted that the superb nativist genre painter, whose sun-splashed landscapes and buxom brown maidens had in the 1930s represented the Philippine countryside as America’s Edenic tropical colony, had simply been appropriated by Imelda in her role as window-dresser for the dictatorship.

In 1973, however, seven more artists were proclaimed National Artists. The seven represented six artistic genres, in effect constructing the infrastructure for a pantheon for honoring artists deemed useful in boosting the image of the New Society. Maganda was no longer simply decorating display windows of her husband’s “smiling” dictatorship, she was turning into a serious partner in promoting the myth that the Marcoses were destined to transform Philippine society. Cynical observers saw the move as Imelda’s open invitation to the country’s intelligentsia to come over to the side of the dictatorship whose Cultural Center on reclaimed ground along Manila Bay, called a “tomb of culture” by

critics decrying the expense that went into its construction and the elitist culture it stood for, needed artists and audiences to justify itself.

Three more years (1976, 1981 and 1982) under Martial Law would up the number of artists honored under Imelda's patronage to 18. Then a hiatus between 1982 and 1986, the years when the New Society began to crumble and Imelda's hegemony in the field of culture and the arts came to an end. Under the post-EDSA administration of Corazon Aquino, culture would cease to have the aura of privilege, it was to assume the aspect of a disgraced favorite amid the ruins of a royal household. The new President sought to distance herself from an Imelda institution by declaring that "culture is not a priority." It was as if she feared to be tainted by what the flamboyant Imelda had touched. A Presidential Center for Culture and the Arts was created to attend to what, in the New Society, was Imelda's prize concern. From hereon, naming National Artists was to become a function of a set of committees, no longer a gesture of patronage. The new period under Corazon Aquino (1987 -1991) was to see nine(9) artists honored under the new system..

The administration of Fidel Ramos (1992-1998) for the first time saw a partial return to patronage in conferring the title of National Artist. To the list of eight artists presented by the selection committee to the President's office, Ramos added the name of a veteran historian as some kind of "Presidential choice." This was to set a precedent that succeeding Presidents were to observe much to the consternation of selection committees. In the 1999 proclamations, Joseph Estrada sneaked in the name of a favorite composer to the final list of four artists. And Gloria Macapagal Arroyo in 2003 added the name of

another writer to the selection committee's list of four (4) artists. To the 2006 recommended artists, Arroyo played patron to a sculptor, bringing to four (4) the count of artists added by "Presidential choice" to the artists with the title of National Artists.

Thirty-four years old this year, with fifty-eight artists to date in its roster, the National Artist Award has been elevated to the level of a Cultural Order known as the Order of National Artists, "fourth in precedence among the orders and decorations that comprise the Honors of the Philippines, and equal in rank to the Order of National Scientists and National Living Treasures Award," by virtue of Executive Order No. 236 dated September 19, 2003.

"Nation" thus has its stake on the National Artist Award. When President Marcos founded it in 1972, it was for a very specific purpose related to the founding of a "nation" he chose to name "The New Society." There has been no known instance of the awarding Administration dictating to a National Artist a propaganda agenda for his artistic output, but sample products from the Martial Law period attest to the potential of art patronage to influence the political orientation of a favored artist's works. Among the "Criteria for Selection" specified by the Order through the content and form of their works, have contributed in building a Filipino sense of nationhood."

Every Administration which has taken over power in the republic through an electoral victory eventually comes to assume that it represents "the nation." The policies it draws up in governance and education are then patterned after its own image of "the nation." In this way, the entire political system evolves an ideological framework that seeks to justify

the institutions it has set up in accordance with the values and the imperatives of “the nation” as imagined by the minds behind the Administration.

“Building a Filipino sense of nationhood,” when passed on from one set of power-wielders to another, could take on the character of a tradition consisting of formulaic concepts and practices, and thus lose dynamism. As a concept in our society, “nation” is not rooted in any concrete historical reality to which it can be referred. In 1898, there was the republic born of the Revolution of 1896 with its libertarian ideals inspired by the European Age of Enlightenment. But that was shattered by the American Occupation that the Treaty of Paris sanctioned. The colonial government that ruled the country from 1898 to 1935 effectively splintered any remembered sense of nation lingering in the memory of Filipinos. The educational system set up by the new colonizers, with English as medium of instruction, substituted the American sense of nation borrowed from the U.S. constitution and specimens of popular American culture for the nation that the ilustrados and the revolutionaries of 1898 had implanted in the consciousness of the generation of Aurelio Tolentino, Patricio Mariano and Faustino Aguilar. Thus, “a Filipino sense of nationhood” was only too easily assimilated into the ideology of the state that the Filipino politicians of the American colonial government had carried over into the Commonwealth of the Philippines.

Where “a Filipino sense of nationhood” ought to imply adherence to nationalism insistent on a sharp distinction between the interests of Filipinos vis-à-vis foreign (specifically, American colonial) interests, what came down to the postwar generation of Manuel Roxas, Elpidio Quirino and Ramon Magsaysay was a diluted consciousness of

loyalty to the Philippine state as it was created in 1946 by American “liberators” and fostered in fear created by American warriors of the Cold War. In art production, nationalism is now eschewed as an extreme position assumed to be aesthetically counterproductive, with patriotism as an amorphous love of country substituting for a sharply political stance in the treatment of issues relating to Filipino-American affairs.

“Art,” in the foregoing, has been shown as tending to be compromised by the ambiguous concept of nation that history has bequeathed our artists. History has similarly betrayed Filipino artists in their search for aesthetic norms. Spain and the U.S. were powerful colonial powers whose cultural impact on the Philippines obscured the cultural identity of the people. The Roman Catholic Church and the public school are two pervasive institutions that saw to the eradication of traces of the precolonial indigenous culture of the natives the better to subjugate the populace. Three centuries under Spain and half a century under the U.S. had rendered the Filipinos with hardly a cultural heritage that they could claim as authentically their own.

In school, Filipinos had been taught to distrust oral culture as “unscientific,” so they are now loathed to turn to the spoken lore current in the community for guidance in evaluating literature and other specimens of art production. What schooling offered were books that expounded on art as this was practiced by Western artists. The resulting situation was heavy dependence on Western art and literary theory by artists and critics discoursing on the practice and output of Filipino writers, musicians, painters and theater artists. As in the case of “nation,” a Filipino identity for “art” was of no consequence.

What applied to art in the West applied as well to art in the Philippines, regardless of the history and culture of the Filipinos. Such universalism, of course, reduced the artistic works of Filipinos when set beside the works of major artists in the West to pale images of the literary and art production turned out by Western artists. Breaking away from the colonial mold could have brought out the uniqueness and originality of specific Filipino art works, but the educational system militated against such liberation. Today, awareness of the need to define norms native to Filipino cultural production has begun to seep into the consciousness of the Philippine academe. Such awareness heralds a brighter future for Philippine art as a distinct product of a people with its own history and culture.

In a society such as ours, where the colonial experience of the people has rendered “nation” and “art” as problematics that artists have to confront in struggling with their craft, the rationale for an institution like the National Artist Award is clear. The Filipino people need to be reminded at every turn of their social life that we are in the grips of a struggle that we cannot break away from. We are a people without a nation, a people in constant risk of losing our identity. We need our artists to help us remember our past and put us in mind of our future. The National Artist Award insists that even without a nation, Filipino artists must be nationalists, artists whose triumphs are landmarks toward the eventual achievement of a genuine “sense of Filipino nationhood.”