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Culture and History, by Joaquin

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Book Reviews

CULTURE AND HISTORY: OCCASIONAL NOTES ON THE PROCESS OF PHILIPPINE BECOMING. By Nick Joaquin. Manila: Solar Publishing Corporation, 1989. 253 pages.

To many young Filipino readers, Nick Joaquin is better known for his novels, plays, short stories and poems. But to the generation born immediately before and after the Second World War, Joaquin was a historian, although probably not in the conventional meaning of the term, which reduces it to an author who collects data and arranges them in chronological order, ever-conscious of the need to simplify complex events in terms of causal relationships. In a number of essays published under his pseudonym Quijano de Manila, Joaquin regaled the readers of the 1960s with provocative studies of history, even as his readers perceived his works, collectively taken, as *The Other* in relation to official history textbooks. His essays, quirky and impressionistic though they might seem to many, combined the creativity of a fictionist/poet and the resourcefulness of a social scientist. The results were pieces that challenged certain canonized views of Philippine history, specifically of the Philippine Revolution and the roles of certain individuals in the problematic events of the 1890s.

Nick Joaquin's collection of such essays, entitled *Culture and History, Occasional Notes on the Process of Philippine Becoming*, should be treated, as the title suggests, as a series of originally independent pieces given some measure of organization for the present book. All fifteen essays, of varying length, touch on formidable concepts—Culture and History—and thus argue that these two terms, far from being antagonistic or mutually exclusive, must be yoked together, even with some violence, in order to understand what the Filipino was and has become through the centuries. The collection divides itself quite neatly into three sections: seven essays are variations on the theme of Culture as History while the following seven pieces fall under the heading History as Culture. The last essay is a restatement of Joaquin's main thesis that indeed culture is history, and that the result of this fusion is a "nation-in-the-making called the Philippines."

It is easy to get lost in the maze of details, mostly descriptive and presented in richly nuanced impressions, that characterizes his essays. Still, it is possible

to extract certain interrelated theses indicative of current thinking, against which the writer delivers his polemics. The first states that the coming of the West with its new tools did not in any way alter our culture, and the second, an argument that invariably flows from the first, asserts that the coming of the West has had a disastrous effect on the Filipino culture and psyche. Joaquin clearly takes a combative position as he attempts to demolish these arguments that have made their appearance in various ways. He draws on actual historical data, ranging from Spanish chronicles to more modern studies (both on the Philippines and on culture elsewhere), and weaves them into a series of propositions to frame his essays. The clearest formulation of these twelve theses is contained in the last chapter where unequivocally he contends that:

The Filipino is the product of a particular history that began in the 16th century and our identity as Filipino was chiefly formed by what I consider the twelve greatest events in Philippine history, greatest because they were the epochal ones, the ones which, by the way we responded to them, determined our response to all subsequent events. (p. 249)

For Joaquin the following are the most significant events: the introduction of the wheel, the introduction of the plow, the introduction of road and bridge, the introduction of new crops, the introduction of new livestock, the introduction of the factory, the introduction of paper and printing, the introduction of the roman alphabet, the introduction of calendar and clock, the introduction of the map, the introduction of the arts of painting and architecture, and the introduction of the *guisado*. For history is not merely the conventional enumeration of events but an attempt to situate the different ways in which culture has reacted to the tools offered to it. Influenced by Marshall McLuhan, Joaquin asserts that all such tools which might even include Christianity, are after all, "media of communication." The complex relationship between these tools and the people has defined and determined the process of becoming.

On the other hand, the argument that a genuine Filipino identity already existed even before the coming of the Spaniards in the sixteenth century is problematized by Nick Joaquin, who in the early essays seeks to explain what he perceives were the immeasurable changes wrought on primitive society by the Spaniards. Our Asianizing, he argues, must be viewed simultaneously with our Westernization, for Asia entered our culture only when we had been opened up by the West. To insist that our Westernization was a betrayal of our Asian soul is to espouse a static view of culture where a race is seen as "timeless" and defined by persistent qualities. His third essay, "Our Hearts in the Highlands," powerfully delineates the limits of the arguments supporting the theory that the colonial era was an aberration that stifled the growth of the uncolonized Filipino. He presents as evidence the image of Igorot "with his stunted figure, his calloused behind and his mouthful of decayed teeth," (p. 58) who, for Joaquin, makes a pathetic symbol.

In the other essays, Joaquin takes on a number of Filipino historians, notably Renato Constantino and Teodoro Agoncillo, and presents views contrary to what have been elaborated in the formers' history texts. Defending

the pivotal role of the *ilustrado*, often belittled by other historians, Joaquin points to the crucial events of the 1890s which witnessed a large number of the elite shedding their blood. On the involvement of this class in the 1896 uprising, Joaquin observes:

Delve as we will into the backgrounds of the provincial leaders of the '96 uprising, whether in Cavite or Bulacan or Batangas or Pampanga, we find none who can be said to be peasant or proletarian; all belong to the gentry, to the landed or professional class, to the bourgeois. (p. 144)

Joaquin goes on to assert in the key chapter, "History as Culture," that in the Philippines, two small tribes—the Tagalog and the Pampango—were the most politicalized and hence, they were the creators of our history. It was the *ilustrados* who made the *indio* conscious of himself as a Filipino and should therefore not be condemned but recognized for their contributions to the process of becoming.

Complementing the thesis of this essay is another polemical essay "Apocalypse and the Revolution," in which Joaquin illustrates his thesis that it was the masses, not the middle class, that turned away from the revolution. Focusing his attention on the popular movement called Guardia de Honor, Joaquin asserts that this group exemplified the masses' betrayal of the revolution, for instead of choosing the republic, the members of the movement chose to flee in search of their apocalyptic vision.

In other essays, Joaquin takes a less polemical stance even as he vividly recreates in the seventeenth century the context against which the Beatas of Manila should be perceived, as in the essay "The Beatas of 17th century Manila." Here, the author graphically reconstructs a series of events that took place in Manila when a group of women demonstrated the heights to which they could go in search of intense spiritual experience. And in "Expression in the Philippines," Joaquin turns his attention to a volume of essays, *Brown Heritage*, and takes on the role of a critic not only of literature but of culture.

In most of the essays, Joaquin keeps returning to his thesis: that the colonial years must be recognized as an important factor in the process of our becoming as a people. Thus, it is almost inevitable that some sections should appear repetitious, as he emotionally refutes the current views of history, ranging from the obviously nostalgic and romantic (the return to the precolonial past) to the deterministic and materialist notions espoused by some historians. Moreover, it is almost as inevitable that he should rise to the defense of the *ilustrado* to the detriment of the masses whom he views with indifference if not contempt. And when he talks of the minority that creates history, he refers exclusively to the educated sector—who for him made the revolution possible. It is quite clear that Joaquin refuses to view history from below, from the point of view of the poor and the ignorant and their construction of reality, which more recent historians have sought to clarify.

In his Preface, Joaquin admits that his essays sometimes clash, and explains this by saying that "some were written when the spirit was flying high and others when the mood was oh grim and dark."

But he clarifies that the intent was always the same: to ask those questions which he thinks have not been asked about history and culture. This Preface must be taken as the frame through which to view this collection, lest the reader find himself unable to accept the many generalizations that Joaquin blithely presents even as he assumes the role of an anthropologist, a sociologist, a historian, a philosopher and a moralist. Compounding the difficulty is the style that the writer employs to shape his arguments. A magician who deftly uses words to argue and, as importantly, to suggest, Joaquin manipulates language to convey his ideas unequivocally. In offering his interpretations, he summons forth the resources of a fictional discourse; thus the reader ends up with narratives on the process of becoming. In the final analysis, what Joaquin does is to problematize certain taken-for-granted notions on history and culture. Many readers, not to say a number of historians, will entertain doubts about his conclusions, about the dearth of research materials, or perhaps even about his definitions of culture and history.

Nonetheless, this collection remains significant mainly because it has attempted to present a series of arguments that question certain canonized views of history. The volume thus becomes one of the many interpretations/reconstructions of recalcitrant reality and the complex process that have shaped both our culture and our history.

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FLOWERS ON FIRE IN THE PHILIPPINES. By Helvecio Mendes.
Quezon City: Claretian Publications (Philippine edition), n.d. xii, 79 pages.

To many a modern cynic/critic, the genre of religious poetry is an anachronism. Too often these days, what passes for art borders, or even embraces, the profane, the lewd, the transient and the trite. Religious poetry is looked upon as incomprehensible issuances which are moving at most, yes, but much removed from day to day realities.

Helvecio Mendes' "Flowers on Fire . . ." is without a doubt, a collection of religious poetry. These works, however, far from being remote, are as close to the human situation as they can get. The poems are raw and visceral while never losing their focus on the spiritual. In the words of Robert Frost, the poems of Mendes spring from ". . . the soul's ethereal into the material."

Each of the poems in "Flowers on Fire . . ." is a prayer. The poems laud, lambast, express gratitude and grief. And except for the times Mendes resorts to labels more befitting a protest placard (for instance, there is the alliterative but otherwise impotent and unpoetic "international imperialism"), his poems sing. Mendes keeps alive the tradition of the Psalms and Lamentations and the daily prayers one recites most often, halfheartedly, without much thought on what the words evoke. Mendes makes us listen to these familiar words again, by the power of his own rendition.