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The Life and Work of Pedro T. Orata

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THE LIFE AND WORK OF PEDRO T. ORATA. By Gregorio C. Borlaza. Manila: Philippine Christian University, 1984. vii, 312 pages.

Born to poor parents in a barrio of Urdaneta, Pangasinan in 1899, Pedro T. Orata had to struggle in order to finish his elementary and high school training. But unlike other barrio lads, he had the privilege (rare even today) of traveling to the United States to pursue higher studies. He obtained the bachelor's degree in education at the University of Illinois (Urbana), the master's and the doctor's degrees at the Ohio State University. His doctoral dissertation revised the theory of the famous educator, Edward L. Thorndike, that transfer of training was possible because of an "identity of elements" involved in the process. Orata showed that it was rather the "identity of principles" that facilitates this learning process. It was considered an important enough conclusion so that the university published the dissertation, a "thing it rarely did." (p. 18).

He was a changed man when he came home in 1927. Aware of the need to improve the education of his countrymen, he felt he had the duty to help prepare better teachers for his country. He wanted the latter to "develop the ability to do research, no matter how simple, so that they could base their teaching on the actual needs and problems of the children and the community from which they came." (pp. 18-19). In other words, the point of departure in education should be the actual condition of the educand.

His first assignment was to teach at the Bayambang Normal School, but he was soon sent to the Philippine Normal School in Manila. A few months later, he was named Assistant Chief of the Research and Measurement Division of the Bureau of Education. Some time in 1928, he was appointed Division Superintendent of Schools in Isabela, and when he topped the civil service examination for superintendents in 1931, he was transferred to Sorsogon where he stayed for the next three years.

He was apparently not entirely happy, and he decided to return to the United States "to make full use of his training" (p. 26). For two years, 1934-36, he was a member of the staff at the Ohio State University. In 1937, he accepted the position of Principal Teacher of Little Wound Day School at Kyle, the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. A man was needed to evaluate the influence of the school on the rest of the Indian community, and Orata was recommended for the position. There he found what later proved to be his particular contribution to education.

Instead of simple book-learning or passive assimilation of information, Pedro Orata introduced the practice of open discussions with both the school children and their parents, to induce them to agree by themselves on the proper solution to daily problems and needs — e.g., why there should be sanitary flush toilets. At the end of the school year, he submitted a detailed report to the National Office of Education in Washington, D. C. The immediate

result was his appointment as supervisor of Home Economics and later Specialist in Guidance and Vocational Information.

His ideas on education were gradually becoming clear, and he began to publish them. In 1941, just before the war, he decided to return home to join Camilo Osias as Technical Assistant of the National Council of Education. He was holding this position when the Japanese war broke out, and he continued with Osias when the latter was named Deputy Minister of Education and Culture by the Japanese government in the Philippines. After a year, he returned to his barrio, Bactad, Urdaneta, Pangasinan, to live with his aging mother and unmarried sister, whose savings, incidentally, had enabled him to travel to the United States after his high school graduation.

Immediately after the liberation, a Captain Kramer from Iowa appointed him "Director of Education" for the "city" of Urdaneta. Unwittingly, the American military officer was launching a work that set Dr. Orata apart. With no material resources to build a school, the new "Director" opened classes in a roofless church, drawing lines to divide the floor into four sections for each of the four years of high school. After three months, thirty-five students graduated and received hand-written diplomas. This was the beginning of what is now known as the Community College and the Barrio High School, a system to provide schooling to as many as possible.

In 1948, Dr. Orata was appointed staff member of the UNESCO in Paris, where he stayed for the next twelve years. This gave him the opportunity to observe schools all over the world, at the same time that he was able to introduce his own ideas to a wide audience. One visible result of this was the 1980 convention in Tagaytay of the World Council of Curriculum and Instruction, organized mainly to observe at close hand how Orata's ideas were working.

No one will quarrel with Orata's dream of sharing the benefits of education with all the citizens of any country. But perhaps it could be debated whether, as he asserts, inadequate education is better than no education at all. The saying is still true that "a little knowledge is a dangerous thing." A badly trained driver of a car is a hazard on the streets. As a matter of fact, the original idea of opening schools at no cost to the national treasury and supported only by local funds has been modified. Financial aid from the national treasury is needed to pay adequate salaries to the teachers. Books have to be provided. And even if help is available from outside sources, this does not belie the objections of those who do not fully agree with the Orata concept of locally administered schools.

Dr. Borlaza, author of this biography, has collaborated with Dr. Orata, a privilege that has given him insight into the ideas of his subject. Perhaps this is the reason for some of the weakness of his book. Pedro Orata is still alive, and so the author does not have the proper distance in time to allow him a balanced evaluation of the man and his ideas. It is still early to tell

whether the education or academic training offered by the Community Colleges or Barrio High Schools does prepare their graduates for their life as adult citizens.

There is a slight tendency to idealize the life of the subject of the biography. For example, it may be true that as a young boy from the barrio, "Orata would take his cot to the seashore and read all afternoon under the shade of some trees while waiting for the *carocod* to be hauled in" (p. 8). Were some corroborating evidence added to his bare statement — a statement from one of his boyhood companions — the reader, like the author, may accept this ideal picture. But is this rather an instance of "the child is father to the man" in reverse?

There is enough material to inform us of Orata's public career. But what of his inner personal life? Why did he choose to be an educator? Why was he particularly attracted to the idea of helping the marginal groups of society? Why was he chosen to be the Principal Teacher of the school in that Indian Reservation? At that time, was it another case of racial discrimination against an Oriental? And what was the role of his mother or his sister? That the latter spent her life savings for his sake speaks volumes of the deep love that must have bound the Orata family; but we have no way of telling.

These are the things that could have added depth to this story. Aside from Orata's love for his animal pets and plants, unfortunately hardly anything is mentioned about the *human* side of Dr. Orata.

There will certainly be another chance to write the definitive biography of Dr. Orata. I would then suggest that it include a special section of sources which would list all his known works and other references that throw light on the man's career. A mere list integrated with the text (as has been done in this biography) serves little purpose and it were better to summarize their content to show the nuances and the growth of the man's ideas.

It is about time that our own Philippine leaders are written about, for they are an inspiration to all of us. Admittedly, this demands discipline and patient scholarly research. It will never do to draw facile conclusions or cover up defects.

Interestingly, this biography illustrates the Orata thesis, namely, inadequate schooling is better than none. In other words, it is better to have this initial, admittedly limited biography, than none at all.

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