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The Fourth National Folklore Congress

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Notes and Comments

The Fourth National Folklore Congress

FLORENTINO H. HORNEDO

Since its foundation in August 1958, the Philippine Folklore Society (PFS) has held four national congresses. The first congress was held in the tenth foundation year of the Society (1968) at Quezon City. The second congress was at Cagayan de Oro City in 1972 and the third at San Carlos University in Cebu City in 1976. This fourth congress was held 4-6 July 1980, at the University of the Philippines in Quezon City. The last two congresses have been significant for the greatly increased number of academic disciplines represented by the participants. In the beginning, the chief participants were anthropologists and folklorists; now educators and a wide assortment of men and women in the humanities are also involved.

BIRTH PAINS OF THE CONGRESS

At the close of the 1976 Cebu congress, many felt that regional folklore congresses should be held midway between the quadrennial national congresses. Subsequently, the Bicol region was chosen for the first regional congress, to be held in the summer of 1978. However, not very long before its scheduled opening, after the speakers had been invited and when some participants from the Manila area were about ready to pack for Bicol, the congress was called off. The disappointment was tempered by the prospect of the 1980 Congress.

By 1979, under the Philippine Folklore Society's president, Dr. Juan Francisco, with the help and initiative of Dr. Mamitua Saber, Dean of Research and curator of the Agha Khan Museum

Mindanao State University (MSU) Marawi City, and Prof. Alfredo Tiamson, the plans for the fourth national folklore congress were fairly definite. It was to be held at the MSU in both Iligan and Marawi, "to give the participants a comparative look at the two Lanao cities and the differing cultures that they represent," to paraphrase Dr. Saber. A Muslim cultural festival in commemoration of the sixth centennial of Islam in the Philippines was also promised.

By December of 1979, the venue was confirmed, the theme formulated (National Heritage, Development, and Unity), the list of speakers drawn up, and the congress dates specified: 15-19 May 1980. Prospective participants from Luzon were to leave Manila by boat on 12 May and arrive in Iligan City in time for the opening of the congress. But by March 1980, the "full support" of the MSU was withdrawn, and suddenly there was a national congress with definite dates, but no venue and no logistics at all. In time, even the date had to go.

In April, the key organizer and fund raiser for the 1976 congress, Prof. Tiamson, and the chairman of the 1980 congress, Prof. Rose Cañeda, in coordination with Dr. Francisco, were frantically hunting in Manila for funding. When they finally came to Filipinas Foundation, Inc. (FFI) in Makati, the theme of "National Heritage . . ." had to go, too, since it was unacceptable for funding by the FFI. But FFI was willing to fund a congress with a theme like "The Role of Folklore in Functional Literacy."

With the new theme, an entirely new set of lectures had to be lined up, and new lecturers invited. The congress dates were initially set for mid-June; then finally for July. One big difficulty in the lining up of lecturers was the fact that most Filipino folklorists have had little to do with depth studies in the "role of folklore in functional literacy." A number of folklorists whose areas of research had no clear relation to the theme had to be excluded from the list of speakers.

As May came to a close, funds for the congress were still insufficient, and some speakers on the list still remained unconfirmed. But the dates and venue were certain: The Institute of Small Scale Industries (ISSI), University of the Philippines, Diliman, Quezon City, 4-6 July 1980.

OPENING CEREMONIES

About a hundred and fifty participants were present at the formal opening of the congress, an hour after the scheduled time. In the absence of the president of the University of the Philippines, Dr. Emmanuel V. Soriano, who was scheduled to welcome the delegates, PFS president Juan Francisco went through the ritual of formally opening the congress and welcoming the delegates. The keynote address of Dr. Abraham I. Felipe, Deputy Minister of Education and Culture (MEC), and President of the Fund for Assistance to Private Education (FAPE) took most of the morning. He said two things: (1) the MEC is the proper agency through which literacy programs can be carried out, and folklorists can promote the program by contributing to the development of literacy materials; and (2) folklorists can help in the current search for Filipino values which, once discovered, can be in turn used to enrich the moral and civic education of the youth.

THE CONGRESS SESSIONS

The congress sessions, five in all, in spite of the literacy theme, usually allowed the spirit to blow where it would. Part of the reason for wandering from the theme was the individual topics of the lecturers. It required some stretch of the imagination to connect "functional literacy" with topics like Dr. E. Arsenio Manuel's "Historical Folkloristics"; Dr. William Henry Scott's "Isabelo de los Reyes: Father of Philippine Folklore"; Prof. Nagasura Madale's "Folklore and Culture Change: The Pengampong Syndrome"; Dr. Resil Mojares' "Folk Drama and Social Organization"; and Dr. Florentino H. Hornedo's "Ivatan Folklore: Roles and Functions." But the audience response was invariably good, an index to the genuine interest and value of the topics to the participants. The open forums were occasions for very profitable dialogue and sharing of ideas, sometimes for comic relief, and occasionally for fireworks. For example, when the question of the *moro-moro* was raised, some tempers flared in spite of the cold weather and pelting rain outside. Since about a third of the participants came from various Mindanao regions and professed the Islamic faith, the reaction to the ritual of Christian triumphalism and Moro defeat in the *moro-moro* was predictable. At one point Prof. Nagasura

Madale defused the animated discussion by calling the argument a moro-moro performance. And that was that.

Topics more or less closely related to the congress' theme were Dr. Saber's "Folklore: A Cultural Heritage and Its Potential Role in Functional Literacy"; Dr. Vicencio Jose's "The Case of Popular Creativity and the Masses"; Kathleen S. Bosscher's "The Use of Folklore in the Literacy Program"; Fr. Antoon Postma's "The Function of Folklore in Mangyan Literacy"; E. Lou Hohulin's "Translational Equivalence"; Dr. Ernesto Constantino's "Philippine Folklore and Philippine National Literature"; Hazel J. Wrigglesworth's "Semantically-Defined Role Names and Places in Ilianen Manobo Folktales"; Artermio Dolor's "Folklore in the School Curriculum"; and Dean Batua Al-Macaraya's "Concepts, Theories, and Practices of Literacy and the Preparation and Production of Its Institutional Materials."

It is hard to say whether it was wisdom or folly to require the lectures to limit their addresses to fifteen minutes when their papers were usually at least an hour long. Invariably, however, they stretched their time to half an hour or more, and tried to cover more ground by rapid reading — to the dismay of the audience. With lecturers who skipped pages or read with ear-straining speed, the audience reaction was bound to be either misunderstanding or whetted curiosity. Fortunately, it was just a bit of the first and much more of the second. The outcome was, I think, some very lively open forums.

THE WORKSHOPS

The workshops were difficult to monitor. Even with the group reports during the last session, it was hard to say what transpired within the workshop rooms. The greatest number attended the workshop on "Folklore: Forms and Functions." The impression was that a great number of participants thought of folklore in its narrow sense of being a body of folk literature. It was explained in one of the workshops that the Filipino word for folklore, *kaalamang bayan*, is a comprehensive word literally meaning "folk knowledge" or "community knowledge." It was also felt that the current concept of "literacy" as the ability to read, write, and count is too narrow and needs redefinition, especially because previous measures of literacy were based on reading and

writing only. The increased availability of audio-visual media that bring heretofore inaccessible information to illiterates and that can create intelligent public opinion may require a reexamination of the definition of functional literacy.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

In looking back at the 1976 congress, a perusal of the published volume of the papers read in that congress shows that a good number of progress reports of on-going folklore research were delivered there. Since 1976, a number of the those studies have been completed and have been published or are in the process of publication. The 1980 papers do not indicate that there are many new research projects (or if there are, they may have been effectively excluded from the Fourth Congress because of the limitation set by the "sponsorable theme"). Besides there was the lack of time: the original plan for a five-day congress had to be cut to only three days — for financial reasons mostly.

It is laudable, of course, that folklorists seek ways and means of rechanneling the benefits derived from folklore studies back to the sources of the folkloric materials — the people. Practical uses of folklore should therefore be discovered. But there is a danger, nonetheless, in the possible subservience of folklore scholarship to vested interests whose support can subvert other legitimate folklore interests.

Finally, it is hoped that the papers of the 1980 congress will not wait four years to see publication, as did the papers read in the last two congresses.