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## **A Voice from the Hills, by Polenda**

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is your work significant? what do you want to tell our readers? The interview in less intelligent hands is banal. Interviewers can learn much from Cid Reyes's style: it is intelligent, informed and prepared. Preparation is the key to Reyes's success. Here is a sample of how he leads the artist/critic onward so that each question reveals even more than the one before. The conversationalist is Alfredo Roces, painter and critic. The conversation starts with Reyes' question on the "early years of modern art in our country." That leads to a discussion on the role of Edades in the birth of modern art, then to the work of artists H.R. Ocampo, Cesar Legaspi, Fernando Zobel, Arturo Luz, Anita Magsaysay-Ho, Jose Joya, Malang, Ben Cab. Then follows a whole discussion on why pop art cannot yet flourish in Manila. (Manila is just on its way to becoming pop!) This leads to conceptual art, to Filipinism in art and Botong Francisco, and the conversation goes on, led by Reyes, from whose tongue roll questions like: "Can you imagine, for instance, as a send-up or emulation of Warhol's Marilyn Monroe paintings, a serial painting on Nora Aunon?" The interviewer is knowledgeable in his field, and so the conversations become intelligent and intellectually satisfying.

*Conversations* is a very important work, and can set the standard for future works in the same genre. One's delight in it, however, is marred by printing flaws, and the newsprint edition which I read did not show the art pieces at their best. The text could stand more careful copy editing, or perhaps the publisher should change presses.

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A VOICE FROM THE HILLS. ESSAYS ON THE CULTURE AND WORLD VIEW OF THE WESTERN BUKIDNON MANOBO PEOPLE. By Francisco Col-om Polenda. Translated and edited by Richard E. Elkins. Manila: Linguistic Society of the Philippines, 1989.

This is a unique and lovely book, fully deserving of the National Book Award given it by the Manila Critics Circle in August 1990. It is certainly the first of its kind, being a voice from remote hills, from a people who have seldom been heard in their own voice.

Francisco Col-om Polenda is a Western Bukidnon Manobo. His people are the indigenous inhabitants of the southwestern quarter of the province. Barrio Barandias, his village, lies in the foothills to the southwest of Mount Kalatungan, about 30 kilometers west of the town of Maramag, Bukidnon. To this area came, in 1954, members of the Summer Institute of Linguistics to study the Manobo language and culture.

In 1956 a government settlement program brought hundreds of landless lowland settlers into the region, causing rapid change in the community, and

therefore "great anxiety and culture stress because the traditional values of the Manobo people were often at odds with those of the newcomers" (p. x)

In 1960 Mr. Polenda was injured in a fall from a truck, and although he could not continue his regular work, he could write. His friend Richard Elkins suggested that he "share his knowledge in the form of essays about different aspects of his cultural heritage" (p. ix). He did, and Mr. Elkins, who had lived periodically in Barandias for twenty-five years, translated them, making an effort to:

... reflect faithfully what the author had expressed ... to sense exactly what it is that the Manobo text is saying and then [to] say the same thing in a way that a speaker of English might say it. A persistent problem has been the fact that the author has written many things which an English speaker would never have occasion to say. (p. ix)

Because, of course, the Manobo language has words for that which is born of the culture, which no other language would have. Still and all, the fact that Polenda and Elkins knew and had taught each other their languages, resulted in this book.

After an Introduction by Elkins which draws the broad perspectives of Manobo culture, the seven sections of the book, on Life Cycle, Social Values, The Home, Livelihood, Politics and Peace Keeping, Getting Along with Gods and Spirits, and Leisure and Beauty, open windows into a culture that has not been heard from before so directly and so faithfully. For language scholars, Appendix A provides a sample of a Western Bukidnon Manobo text analyzed linguistically; Appendix B supplies the complete Manobo texts. The volume closes with a glossary and a bibliography.

The special experience of the book, however, is definitely the reading of—or perhaps learning to read—the essays of Polenda, which are the voice of the Manobo.

Writing about marriage, for example, Polenda outlines the Manobo's belief that life is a journey, the world merely a place "to spend the night," before going on home:

We know that this world where we are now is just a place to "spend the night," as it were, and we understand also that no one spends the night during a journey who doesn't intend to continue on his way ... but no traveler spends the night somewhere who doesn't eventually return to where he came from. ...

This journey here on earth is the way *Nengazen* [the creator of everything both great and small and the source of all things] designed for testing us, his creatures, to see which of us will be obedient to follow and remember the ways and customs, the paths of joy and of peace between himself and us, his creatures, which he first taught to mankind. (p. 3)

The essay on "Catching Food Creatures in the Water" has very specific details about the material culture: Both men and women work at catching

water creatures, and when women do it, it is called *penikep*, whether done by wife and husband, or women together. It is done by feeling in holes and under rocks, and catching small creatures with the hands.

Men, on the other hand, spearfish with goggles, go torch-fishing (*ebpenulu*), make dams, rig up hook and line, fashion fishtraps called *ebpenungkub*, *sungkub*, *buu*, *takep* (for eels) or use derris (a ground creeper) root, which is pounded till its sap flows into the water and poisons the fish.

The skills of food-gathering in the water are highly articulated and elaborated: there are proper methods and equipment, even nights for particular prey ("Every river has its own schedule," [p. 99]). There are gods of the water—*Elimegkat* and *Bulelakew*—to call upon and to offer sacrifices to, in exchange for the catch (whether successful or not), and to prevent sickness and death.

Over all this there is a faith and a philosophy:

Regarding these things which God created and gave to all mankind, they were created because God desires and is pleased that people eat tasty things while they, mere mortals, live here on the earth. The time will come when God will take back from them the breath of life which he lent to them and each one will disappear from the sight of his fellow men. For God gives long life to people so that they may completely experience and reach the goal which He has set before them here on the earth whether they desire to be upright or wicked, good or bad. That final end for everyone is always God Himself, for he is the creator and the beginning of all things and is the one to whom all things return whether they be human or animal, animate or inanimate, for He is the only one in whom is true and right judgment; He judges the customs and works of men as to whether they are good or bad. (p. 98)

In writing about childbirth and death, weapons and leadership, farming and hunting, body decoration and drunkenness, housebuilding and shamanism, Polenda gently reveals a culture vastly different, yet amazingly familiar. We are given to understand how the Filipino can be of many cultures, yet one; how the circumstances of geography can shape different lifeways; how belief and practice can make for diverse yet related moral universes.

*A Voice from the Hills* is the first book in which a member of a minority cultural community has been able to speak in his own voice—and thus his people's—by the grace of his education, the availability of a sensitive and informed translator, and the opportunity of publication. A life that would otherwise have remained hidden from most is here unveiled, uncovering new vistas of culture and humanity. May more such voices be heard.

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