

ON SOME ASPECTS OF DR. JOSE RIZAL'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS CULTURE

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It was past dusk when the Spanish vessel *Cebu* laid anchor in the choppy waters off Dapitan. And soon the night broke over a gray and strange world of luxuriant vegetation. On board was a *filibustero*, clad in the latest European fashion style and every inch a highly cultured man. When he landed ashore, he had in him a deep feeling of anguish and despair. He saw nothing, heard nothing except the rustling of coconut palm leaves and the haunting sounds of waves surging to-and-fro upon the sandy soil. He paused for a moment to search the troubled Asian horizon for a last glimpse of it, but its shifting mirage had seemed to vanish under the heavy cover of darkness, as if to hide forever from the overpowering beauty of the new world of nature which destiny, or call it fate, had thrown him into as a political exile. This historic moment was the 17th of July, 1892, and the man who was put ashore by the agents of his arch-enemies was Dr. Jose Rizal.

It was a name that had made its imprint in the intellectual circles of Europe. And now it is an institution to many of us and a legend to a few faithful disciples. Blumentritt, Ullmer, Rost, Pastells, De Wecker, Jagor, and Virchow were great names with which he was identified as he grew into manhood in search of Western science and learning. Calamba, Leitmeritz, Heidelberg, Madrid, Hongkong, Boulevard Arago in Paris, London, Berlin, Dapitan and Manila are historical places that are eternally associated with him. Generations of foreign and local writers and scholars have written much about him and sung of him, weaving new and elaborate patterns of design and interpretations.

In life as well as in death, he has remained the single most illustrious son in all pre-modern Philippines. So far, three generations of our youth virtually grew up with him. They have shared and have been identified with his achievements, his changing fortunes, his struggles, and ultimate redemption. Rizal, the man and the legend are closely inter-twined. The man, belonging to that rare breed the RENAISSANCE aptly called *homo universalis*, contributed to the development of the legend and the legend in time gave form, substance and meaning to the man. Their intricate and composite character, particularly the manner and time of its development affords not only an insight into the loving and enduring enthusiasm for him of the Filipino populace, but also provides us a significant pathway for a closer examination of some of his cultural views. Dr. Rizal combines, therefore, all the elements that make for a leading national hero

and the legend that transcends time and place.

If we wished to do justice to so complex a figure as Rizal, I would only propose to make an analysis of some aspects of his attitude towards culture.

In the era between 1885 and 1896, quite a few Asians such as Li Hung Chang, Gokhale, Syed Ahmad Khan and Ito Hirobumi blossomed into great personalities - all of whom were endowed with perspicacity of mind and with a remarkable power of character. But unlike most of these Asian contemporaries of his, Jose Rizal was the most unusual and quite unique a personality, judging from his rich and varied cultural background, his superior values, and the lofty ideals by which he lived. He was the product of the interplay between the socio-historical forces at work in his native land on one hand, and the interaction between western science and traditional values on the other.

In Rizal's time, no institution of learning in the Philippines could satisfy the inner intellectual yearnings of the gifted Filipinos. They had to seek outside learning. For the young Filipinos like Rizal, the most attractive elements of the western world were the rights of men, culture and education - education not only for the emancipation of his people from the quagmire of ignorance and superstition, but also a new cultural outlook for the breaking up of the traditional resistance to change and modernization. The young Filipinos did not turn their back on the western world. Their assiduous interest continued to be universal in scope and humanistic in character. Hence, we found our young Rizal dependent on European scholars, almost exclusively for the development of his intellect and professional growth. Germany was then the haven for the study of the methods for cultural research and in that European state, Rizal's studies were closely influenced by the approaches of the German scholars. His balanced humanistic and scientific studies in the key intellectual centers of Europe trained him to translate facts and insights into ideas and then into moving words and action. He committed himself to sound scientific inquiry and the spirit of nationalism to advance reform, to destroy the myth of Malay cultural inferiority as evidenced by his annotations of Antonio de Morga's *Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas*, to cultivate one common language, to expose Spanish misrule in archipelagic Philippines in his two immortal novels - *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibustero* - his greatest literary legacies to us.

Rizal was not merely a humanist but a modernizer whose brief but meaningful existence spanned a wide range of highly creative activity. His activities, while in Dapitan, may be regarded as a model of man's effort to transform the life pattern of a microcosmic community. There was hardly any phase of the life, growth and development of Dapitan in, which he did not assume a lively and earnest interest, ranging from encouraging the townspeople to develop the spirit of entrepreneurship to the education of the youth, from the beautification of the plaza to the construction of a water system, from

agricultural endeavor with a view to increase the output to the erection of a clinic for the afflicted, to mention but a few of his community involvement. With varying degrees of success, he kept himself useful, busy, and above all creative - the quintessence of life. He was always willing and alert to put his Western ideas, scientific knowledge and humanism into practice. His passion for innovations led him to introduce new methods and new techniques of doing things. Rizal's endeavor to make, therefore, the individual responsible for, as well as responsive to, community needs made his social action program in Dapitan both sound and effective. It was in Dapitan too that he found ample time necessary for reading, writing to his friends abroad, commercial enterprise for economic nationalism, farming for self-sufficiency, and above all contemplation to appease the innermost longings of his soul.

The educational experiment at the school in Talisay was his concrete answer in miniature scale to his aspiration for effecting change in the whole mental outlook of his people. A man like Rizal with a purposeful mission in life would not hesitate to bear the responsibility of reforming the bad habits and ways of his people and of developing the minds of the gifted. What he aimed to do was to transform the old colonial educational program which serviced a miniature elite into a program which would give the greater number of the Philippine populace the essential loyalty to the national community and technological competence required for a modernizing state. What he observed in Europe among the many Filipino students had a disconcerting effect on him. What hurt him most deeply were their lack of social conscience, their feeling of superiority, their distaste for manual labor, their lack of self-discipline and sarcastic attitude vis-a-vis their less fortunate countrymen and their disdain for their traditional values and customs. In Talisay, he endeavored through his new educational program to rectify the glaring inadequacies on the part of some of his fellow countrymen. He knew too well that most of the members of Filipino traditional elite who were superficially acquainted with western culture could not well serve as leaders in the development of national solidarity and cultural unity, because of their heavy interests in upholding the status quo. According to Rizal, he pinned his hope on the emergence of a new elite to be characterized by its idealistic outlook, drive, integrity, vision and a new type of cultural orientation. Such a new breed of Filipinos would constitute a single dynamic force in the cultural transformation of the nation.

His program of studies stressed both formal academic and scientific subjects, plus the practical application of knowledge. To this, he added a program of physical fitness. His curriculum at the school in Talisay offered not only preference for the teaching of English as foreign language, perhaps in anticipation of the rise of America as superpower in the Pacific basin, but also certain highly influential views concerning the development of a cultured Filipino gentleman. He believed that teaching could be enhanced through the

spirit of scientific inquiry and research, and in so doing he preoccupied himself with the study of the natural life in the area. To him, it was the solemn duty of the teacher to mold the character as well as to develop the minds of his pupils. And that every lesson, especially reading and writing lessons, should be the instruments of moral as well as intellectual uplift. The best method of teaching, according to Rizal, is to do things by example and to practice actively what one is preaching. His educational objective was two-fold: to establish a valid deductive method by which to treat and dispose of knowledge, and to demonstrate that knowledge about the world of nature and the world of men only advances realities or truths. His advocacy of the efficacy of western science and the preservation of the best in the Filipino ethical traditions were fully reflected in his immortal body of works.

Rizal considered self-improvement as a prerequisite to self-enlightenment. He placed special emphasis on the need for self-discipline and self-denial. It was through supreme effort that we could develop in us self-discipline and the loving concern for our people, could do away with artificial frivolities in life, could return to the natural simplistic way, could face squarely all difficulties and hardships, and could be indifferent to petty rewards and honors.

Rizal was a true humanist in the same vein as Gandhi, Sun Yat-sen and Fukusawa Yukichi. Both Christianity and rationalism were important currents in the making of Rizal's cultured mind. He was able to show that man could be both religious and modern at the same time in the Philippine setting. In other words, there is no incompatibility between the spark of divinity in man and the spirit of modernity in him. Never was he anti-church, only anti-clerical, as most European liberals of his time were. It is in this context that his critics failed to grapple the inner meaning behind the dual but close relationship between a religious being and the layer of modernity in him.

His ability to transcend the bonds of his traditional culture without rejecting western culture was indeed something for us to emulate. By accepting western culture, he did not place himself out of touch with his native culture. In this sense he could be thought of as the epitome of a transitional figure and the greatest Filipino who ever lived in pre-modern Philippines. When we view his life while at Dapitan, we may safely say that it revolved around two dominant themes: (a) his love for the rustic life and (b) his stoic resignation in the face of the harsh realities of the world. He did not conceal his joy at being finally free from the problems of his native land and slowly resigned himself to his ultimate fate. His was an attitude which exalted the triumph of the human spirit and indifference to the Asian world in turmoil and change. At times, in him ran a deep current of inquietude, doubt and despair, for he was just too human and thus could be beset by melancholy. There were moments that his very isolation and inaction under the rigors of tropical condition wore heavily upon his spirit, particularly after the secret visit of Dr. Pio Valenzuela when he could not keep

his eyes from the forthcoming sordid upheaval with its bloody repercussions. It was despair that many of his fellow intellectuals faced with the same dilemma, had shared in that trying decade of the 1890's. In life he chartered a progressive-like course of self-realization and self-enlightenment, leading him first from the narrow, parochial world of colonial life to the western world of freedom and liberalism; then, moving backward once more to his own cocoon of the traditional world, he thus realized that he was both of the western world and the world of traditional Philippines.

In this sense, his life was a constant conflict between what he originally was - a creature of the colonial regime and what he had made of himself after his exposure to the western world, which he wanted his people to be: free, humanistic-oriented, open to the world of tomorrow. In a way, he was never able to achieve a synthesis of these two basic strains within his personality. There was a recurring vacillation, an anguished hesitancy in his soul. From the hindsight of three generations after his death, this was quite natural. The highest form of synthesis could only be achieved by his people. And, towards this end, his martyrdom acquires a meaning beyond the death of just a mortal being who loved his people very much. With his passing away in that dismal dawn in Luneta, he was actually pointing to that very synthesis of his people's culture through all the vicissitudes of history: a new people, *isang bagong bayan*, committed to a new destiny, engaged in its continuing search for a better future. It is in this context that a passage in his 'Ultimo Adios' gains a profound significance.

I quote from the translation by a great contemporary Filipino poet: 'I am to die when I see the heavens go vivid, announcing the day at last behind the dead night. If you need color - color to stain that dawn with, let spill my blood: scatter it in good hour and drench in its gold one beam of the newborn light.'

On the cold morning of December 30 at 7:03, a century ago, he fell dead in Bagumbayan for a new Filipino community.