



Let me begin with my conclusion: Philippine culture is a powerful teaching tool, and it can be used, in fact many are already using it, in three ways: (1) as the context for learning; (2) as part of the pedagogy, of the strategy of the teaching; and (3) as teaching material or subject matter. Let me explain, by going back to the beginning.

## *The Teacher in Philippine Culture*

The teacher in Philippine culture is a central figure, an important member of the community. In the early coastal and riverine villages where our country began, all adults functioned as teachers. They shared technology, experience and expertise with the young, as they showed them, teaching by example — where and how to find food in the forests; how to hunt; how to handle birth, illness and death; how to fight; how to survive. They also taught them the tribal mores, beliefs, customs, including a way of seeing.

Among the nomadic Aetas, for example, the only form of literature is the riddle. Sitting around a clearing, or a fire, trading and answering riddles about nature, about objects, about customs, as a way of socializing, a way of entertaining each other, and also a way of teaching. A riddle is a metaphor, a way of seeing. It links disparate objects and demands a particular thrust of the imagination. It is, in effect, a micro-lesson in literature that teaches observation, awareness, and the use of metaphor.

The surrounding world as classroom, life as teaching material, community survival as the great lesson, the adult as teacher: that is the teaching module deep within our history and culture.

And it is still with us. The country as community, its development and survival, with each of us contributing — that is still the great lesson. The world immediately surrounding, as well as the global village — that is still our classroom. Philippine society, history, experience,

and culture, is still the basic material that we teach in our classrooms. The difference is that we teachers in the classroom are teachers by profession. We have been assigned the role; we are committed to the job which other adults have delegated to us because it is our profession, our vocation, our calling.

Our classroom has expanded, however. From the tribal village it is now the school, the region, the country. Our task is the same and not the same: to teach our students how to survive, yes, but in the global village; how to learn further and develop themselves and the country; how to contribute fruitfully to humanity; how to eventually run homes, businesses, communities, hospitals, governments, countries, international ventures; how to develop the technology that reaches cyberspace, the moon, outer space, and the farthest reaches of the imagination.

A magnificent task, and how do we do it? Exactly as we did it in the little riverine and coastal villages: through the culture. The Aeta riddle worked within the culture to teach the children about the flora and fauna, the objects surrounding, and about relationships as well. Here is an example:

Atta: *Magitubang yu abbing*  
*A makkaray si inno na.*  
 (Kalabasa)  
 While the child sits,  
 the mother crawls. (squash plant)

Tagalog: *Ang anak ay nauupo na*  
*Ang ina'y gumagapang pa.*  
 The child is already up sitting  
 but the mother is still creeping.

This has analogues as well in Pampango, Bikolano, Ilokano, Pangasinan, Ibanag, Bontoc, Ilonggot, Kalinga, Cebuano, Hiligaynon, Aklanon, Waray, Tagbanwa, Cuyonin, Chavacano, Maguindanao, West Subanon, and Dibabawon (Davao). It is not only the Aetas who teach through riddling.

The object of the riddle is a vegetable, a product of the natural environment, how it grows, where the fruits are found — sitting on the ground, even as the vine creeps further away. The means to perception is the comparison: a human relationship, that between

mother and child, and the “unusualness” in this case, for the child already sits upright, while the mother still creeps along and away. How mother and child relate and behave in the culture is the context from which perception comes; the different and unusual ways in which particular plants grow, is the insight. The purpose of the lesson is to teach powers of observation, as well as the ways of nature, and the nuances of family relationships. It is thus a whole, complete lesson with the material, the “visual aids,” and the purpose, all within the culture.

I venture to say today that our teaching is still, and should be, within the culture; and when it is, it is at its most ideal and most powerful. In other words, Philippine culture still lives in the classroom, and is the medium through which we best teach the young Filipino.

### *Culture as Context*

When we teach literature, for example, any literature, from any country, we are using Philippine culture as context, whether we do it deliberately or not.

Let us say that the story is Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado,” with its theme of revenge. The motive for revenge was an insult, and whether we point it out or not, the Filipino understands that, because losing face, in our culture, is deeply humiliating and can cause family feuds, violence and the seeking of revenge. Fortunato, the victim, is enticed by Montressor into the cave through his interest in a rare sherry, Amontillado. Now that is not something we find within our culture, but in order to understand it, we seek comparisons with ours. What could entice a *Pinoy* (Filipino) Fortunato as strongly as Amontillado did the Italian? In recreating the experience of the story, we rebuild its world — by comparing it with the one we know, with ours.

If the story we are taking is Filipino, say, Manuel Arguilla’s “Midsummer,” then we have the physical manifestations of the culture to help us: the dry season; the heat; the rocky, waterless riverbed; the “sun-burnt cogon grass;” the dust, the hot and thirsty carabao. And in contrast: the girl in light red blouse filling a cool red jug with water. The encounters are heat and coolness, physical effort and relief, man and woman. We and our students build up and appreciate the images

in our minds because we know the culture from within, and can understand why the young man “felt that he could follow the slender, lithe figure ... to the ends of the world.”

The story may be totally alien to our culture and our time, say, science fiction. In Ray Bradbury’s “The Veldt,” doting parents have given their children a nursery in which a thought, a wish, can bring to life any world they choose: that of Alice in Wonderland, that of Rima in Green Mansions, that of Sinbad the Sailor, or that of the African veldt. They already live in a house which provides meals, baths, all comforts, without the need of human effort. When their parents refuse to let them take the rocket to New York, they seem to the children to turn from Santa Claus to Scrooge, and the children “punish” them. “Weird!” my students say: not only the futuristic setting, but the children unwilling to obey parental rules.

We interrogate ourselves as parents and as children. How do we feel about that in our culture? How do we do things in our culture, present or future? What is the implication of a work-less world — in our culture? What is the implication of having the house, thus science, do everything parents used to do for their children?

For present or future, local or alien, the context of our understanding is our culture. When we do not understand that which is alien, we must find connections and contrasts within our culture so that we can understand. The basis of any love story is the encounter of man and woman, but how it unfolds — in Japan, the U.S., Europe, the Philippines; in a cafeteria, a museum, a spaceship, an apartment — differs according to the culture. And to each of us, the way of understanding lies in our particular culture.

In the 40 years I have been teaching composition, I have found certain basic errors in grammar and diction that occur again and again. We Filipinos have problems with the past perfect tense, the subjunctive mood, and the use of prepositions. Why the past perfect tense? Simply because it is not in our culture. Our languages do not distinguish between past actions, between that which is prior to another past action, which we must then put into the past perfect tense, and that which is more recent, which we put into the simple past. In Filipino languages, the past is simply past. “I had taken breakfast when he arrived,” becomes simply “*Nakakain na ako noong dumating siya.*” When this is pointed out to students, then they

understand why the past perfect tense exists. It may take some time for them to develop the habit of using it, but they understand.

The subjunctive mood, the mood of wish, supposition, impossibility even, is not often used correctly either. Again, it is the culture. "If I were king" becomes, in our languages, not a wish or supposition but a possibility: "Kung ako maging hari . . ." That is cultural too, the wish as always possible.

Prepositions have a cultural explanation too, especially since most of them do not have logical explanations at all. *Sakay* for us, is to ride anything that can bear us anywhere: a horse, a carabao, a bicycle, a tricycle, a jeep, the *estribo* (aisle) of the jeep, a bus, the top of the bus ("topload"), a boat, a plane. But in American idiom, one rides only a horse or a bicycle, because one takes a bus or a boat, boards a helicopter or a spaceship. Realizing the contrasting ways of cultures helps one understand the ununderstandable ways of prepositions.

Our culture is the only way through which we can reach understanding of other cultures — and ultimately of ourselves.

My students love Nick Joaquin's "May Day Eve," even when they no longer go to balls that end at midnight, or hear the *guardia sereno* (roving sentinel) in the streets of Intramuros, or believe that love lasts forever. They may claim that they are not superstitious, but they resonate to Agueda standing before the mirror and wanting to see the man she is going to marry. Why? Because we retain a belief in the supernatural, in symbolic magic, that is deep within the culture. We believe in the "trap of a May night . . . the snare of summer . . . the terrible silver nets of the Moon" because our culture is still close to nature, to the elemental, still carries vestiges of the relationships the traditional Filipino had with spirits, ancestors, and the other world. Yes, despite science and cyberspace.

I have never taught mathematics or science, but I suspect that even there we need to travel through our culture to get to understanding. But I have taught history, and there have called on culture as well to make sense of the movements of people and nations.

### *Culture as Relationships*

I also believe that culture is in the classroom in the way we deal with our students and enable them to learn. It is not only in the lessons, the material we handle and discuss, but in the human equation.

All that we consider “good human relations” comes from the culture. What is a good person? one who has *pakikisama* (good social relations), *pakiramdam* (sensitivity to others’ needs), *pakikipagkapwa-tao* (consideration of others). And so the teacher must have all this, must understand, for example, that the student is coping with the demands of parents, other teachers, even the community. The teacher must also deal with the demands of *barkada* (peer group) and *kaibigan* (friends). The teacher must know that to be *ahas* (a snake) or *plastic* (a hypocrite) is abhorrent to *kaibigan*, *barkada*, and *pakikisama*. The teacher, in dealing with a student in a classroom, is thus also dealing with family, friends, and community.

In this context the teacher is not only the adult of the tribal village who has technology, experience, and expertise to share. He or she is also the tribal elder, and therefore father or mother. He or she is also a tribal leader, and therefore wise. (No wonder teachers are called upon to count votes, to serve as judges in beauty competitions, to direct plays and programs and pageants, and to advise students and their families on all aspects of worldly venture.) He or she is also therefore role model, director, consultant. I remember a fellow teacher saying: “You know why our job is so tiring? Because we are always on performance level. If I droop, my class droops. If I am upbeat, so is the class.”

As we deal with each of the 40, 50 students in our four, five, six classes a semester, we are calling on all our cultural wisdom and ways: *pakiramdam*, *pakikisama*, *pakikipagkapwatao*, *pakikiisa* (cooperation). When we read of the ways teachers have to survive, say, in the public schools of Harlem, New York, a world of kids with ice picks and guns and drugs, we see that they have to treat those kids in a particular way. They cannot be just teacher/parents; they must also be policemen, psychiatrists, social workers, perhaps SWAT teams,

We Filipino teachers are not just pedagogues; we are, because of the culture which determines how we relate, also parents, tribal wise men and women, social and role models maybe — occasionally policemen and women — but always community leaders, advisers, keepers of the faith.

## *Culture as Lesson*

All this would suggest that it is good to actively study our culture, not only as an aid to teaching subjects (literature, composition), not only as an aid to teacher-student relations, but as actual subject matter of great interest and import.

Our customs, our crafts, our arts, the ways we do things, the ways we used to do things — all can be discovery, intensely interesting, and a path to the understanding of what it is to be Filipino.

One of the first tasks I was given when I joined the Ateneo was to run a seminar on Philippine culture. The talk on Philippine Philosophy was given by Roque Ferriols, S.J., who said “I am not a Filipino philosopher; I am a Filipino who teaches philosophy. The Filipino philosopher, he who embodies the Filipino philosophy, is probably walking on a Cordillera mountain top, and is not speaking to you today because he did not go to college.” Then he gave an example of the way Filipino philosophy works.

Two families in a provincial town had a bad feud that had already gone through two generations, and resulted in killings and great enmity. One day, one young member of *Clan A* decided it was time to end this nonsense. And so he went over to the house of a member of *Clan B*, and asked for a drink of water. He was told, “Sure, go into the kitchen and help yourself.” He did, dipping the coconut shell into the water jar. And the feud was ended. And they all knew it.

Why? Because the negotiations had all been carried out in the non-verbal communication of community action, or action meaningful to the community within the framework of Filipino philosophy. The violence ended without anyone losing face, without the risk of refusal, within an implicit acceptance of community values.

In the first semester of school year 1996-97, I taught a course on “Philippine Art and Culture” in the Juniorate, to the young Jesuits. We began by exploring where each one had come from: two from Cebu, one from Bicol, one from Las Piñas, one from a residential subdivision in Parañaque. What was the culture of each place? the food culture, the feasting culture, the neighborhood culture, the arts and crafts?

We were learning about Philippine music, dance, theater, visual arts, dress, literature, performance. At one time, we sang *pasyon* (the

Lenten Passion narrative) before a “barriotic” *kubol* (hut). Most of one day we spent in Angono having breakfast; visiting a *balut* (fertilized duck egg) factory; walking along the street where fried *itik* (duck) is dressed, boiled, then fried; visiting the Blanco Museum; and then having lunch of *dalag* (murrel), *kanduli* (catfish), *karpa* (carp). Experiencing Philippine culture.

It was like *Foxfire*, which some of you may have heard of. In a “barrio” in the Appalachians, a young teacher, not having a library or visual aids, sent his students out into the community to find out how maple syrup was made, how pigs were butchered, how quilts were sewn, how a snakebite was treated, how liquor was distilled, etc. In other words, how people lived before and after technology. The teacher used the community to teach his students, and his students to teach the community.

The immediate result was bonding between the school and the community, the students and the culture. The old people were happy to teach; the students were excited to learn. They wrote up their experiences in a newspaper they edited and published. The eventual result was a book, *Foxfire*, that became a nationwide bestseller. It earned the school money for a library and audio-visual equipment, but, more importantly, it taught the students and the community pride in themselves, and an appreciation of their traditional folkways.

Imagine our students, therefore, not only reading Guy de Maupassant, Yasunari Kawabata, and Ernest Hemingway from within the context of Philippine culture, but also actively collecting local riddles and folk tales; interviewing old people on weaving, cooking, singing *pasyon*; collecting the oral history of our barrio leaders, towns, heroes; doing face-to-face interviews with workers and professionals; writing plays about folklife, perhaps in *komedya* and *sarswela* form (plays in verse and musical form), or in Brechtian or avant-garde forms; making baskets and *parols* (Christmas lanterns), staging *Panunuluyan* and *Pastores* (Christmas plays); writing, editing and publishing community newsletters.

Imagine us teachers equipped not only with our academic degrees, but also with our community roles of elder, model, and leader. Imagine us teaching not only with the pedagogy (ESL, EFL, the communicative method, literary theory), but with the strength of our culture (*pakiramdaman*, *pakikisama*, and *pakikipagkapwatao*). Imagine us



teaching not only composition, language, literature, creative writing, and journalistic writing, but also and with Philippine literary dramatic forms, Philippine lifeways and customs, values and ideals, development and nationhood.

That is powerful teaching. That is power. We would be well equipped indeed, not only with our positions and our learning, but with the deep, wonderful culture behind us, surrounding us, growing around us. It would bond us and our students, as together we perceive it, appreciate it, and contribute to it. Richly.

Culture in the classroom is our power, our privilege. It will also, I assure you, bring real pleasure into our job, into our lives. 