

TESTIMONIAL TO A TIRELESS PIONEER

By ARNOLD MOLINA AZURIN

He is pushing 80, his pate more prominent than his cornsilk mane, eardrums less cooperative now, and yet the foremost Filipino anthropologist has still a lot of spunk, and as passionate with his scholarly pursuits as when we first met him 20 years ago. That time, Dr. E. Arsenio Manuel was coaxing us before the class into recalling some sexy doggerels of the northern coast that Ilocano parents usually chant to their children to make them conscious of the varied genitalia of little boys and girls. The tingling sensations of growing up, remember?

That's one vital part of folklore (as if an apogetics is called for) of which Dr. Manuel is the supreme student, or high priest if this research filed were elevated to a religious cult.

But on the matter of the prehistory of the country, he carefully retraces the footpath of the pioneer H. Otley Beyer. Look, even the way he writes his byline reflects that of his American mentor.

Apart from that *Beyer-esque* idiosyncrasy in appellation, this Filipino anthropologist has refined most of the pioneers' notions, folkloric collections, and shed the more unsalvageable speculations. As a stickler for precise footnotes and report format, he is a pain in the neck of most of his students. "Dr. Manuel is the most prodigious in output, consistent in outlook, and comprehensive in fieldwork," says Dean Zeus Salazar of the UP College of Social Science and Philosophy.

Among his colleagues, he does not hesitate to breathe down anyone's neck, if he has to. Dr. Jose Panganiban's identification of Philippine epics was re-evaluated by Manuel who then cut the list by one-half, simply because "the existence of the text is one of the essentials in epic studies."

Again, he openly dismissed the so-called "Bidasari" epic cited by Antonia Villanueva (in her "The Philippine Epics," UNITAS) as lacking "the proper documentation though asserted warmly." During the UGAT conference, Manuel was once more hacking away at the most persistent epic story of the nation — that Filipinos descended from Malays and Indone-

sians—as the greatest error of scholars, past and present.

So, who were our progenitors? From what “bamboo” did Malakas and Maganda really spring out of? Or in what cavern did Angalo and Aran cradled the first human beings in these islands?

Manuel debunked the term “Malayo-Polynesian and its derivative Malayan” as obsolescent and a distorted relic of the colonial age, insofar as the Filipinos’ ancestry is concerned.

He pointed out that the “early ideas and concepts have produced a mental aberration which has become widespread in the scholarly world and therefore deserves some serious consideration.” Such a mental condition, he added, has “penetrated national thinking and behavior . . . in almost all aspects of this country’s culture, history, literature, biography, and the arts.”

Just how did the scholarly misperception turn contagious and pernicious?

“These terminologies have generated concepts and ideas that disturb Filipino identity and nationality. The historians and scholars of this country before the 20th century, as everyone knows in the academe, were foreigners, most of them Spaniards. Their works . . . point to the Malays, with the exception of the Negritos, as the origin of the Filipino people. In other words, Filipinos are descendants of Malays. All subsequent historians, foreigners and Filipinos alike, have accepted this view as proved fact and the truth.”

Obsolete, crude labels

This fraudulent precept in social science has long been junked more than a hundred years ago by my well-known *kababayan* Isabelo de los Reyes who explained that *Malay* or *Indonesia* were not at all descriptive of ethnic identity or racial origin but of a political classification. For instance, the British in Southeast Asia called all their subjects, whether pygmies or the taller Dayaks, as “Malays.” The two terms could stand for all types and color of tribesmen in Southeast Asia, but could not distinctly refer to a particular genetic or ethnic group simply because the Dutch colonizers merely called their colonial possessions in the region as Indonesia, in accordance with their

view that India was the great culture center and source of the traditions and that their colony was under the sway of India — indisputably, a very European view that also led them to mistake the natives of the New World as “Indians,” since Columbus thought he had reached the coast of India, which was yet half-way around the world. Don Belong also corrected the “migration wave” theory as mere hogwash by pointing out that there was no evidence in ethnography, demography nor geography that one group really occupied a particular layer or altitude in the terrain. Neither could it be proved by any shred of data that one group arrived ahead of another, in a step-up progression of cultural advancement. Meaning that there were primitive, headhunting Malays contemporaneous with the primitive, headhunting Indonesians, contemporaneous with other Asian types.

Why this grand falsehood was foisted on schoolchildren despite the unscientific nature of this cultural genesis only proves what Manuel disclosed before the UGAT conferees: that European scholars in the 18th and 19th centuries created unscientific labels which got stuck with the later batch of researchers up to this generation.

Manuel recalled, by way of illustration: “Then came the general linguists who wrote introductory works on linguistics. Among them, Gleason wrote: “The whole Philippine area uses Indonesian languages: Tagalog, Bisayan and Ilocano are the best known.”

If one should find that assertion a bit silly now, such folly among the “learned” should be traced all the way to the arbitrary invention of the original labels which clearly had no “ethnographic and artifactual basis. In other words, the most fundamental presumptions of the cultural vista we have acquired from the classrooms should be “unlearned.” Malayo-Polynesian should be replaced with “Philippineasian,” according to Manuel, since the evidence he has gathered shows that the inhabitants of the Philippine Archipelago were the ancestors of the Malayan and Indonesian peoples, based on the post-glacial migration of aboriginal Asians from the mainland to the island world of Southeast Asia. He furthered showed that the reverse direction of migration was most unlikely.

The linguist Dr. Ernesto Constantino underscored to this

writer that this viewpoint surrounding the "Philippineasian" as the antecedent of the Malay or the Indonesian has been ventilated by Manuel since the Sixties yet. It's a pity our textbook writers are still stuck with the obsolete, colonial terms and bias. As a perverse consequence, look at the way Jose Rizal was invariably labelled by our reputable writers and scholars, "The Great Malayan" or "Pride of the Malay Race," even as they point out the details of his genealogy as of Chinese lineage, on either parental side.

One more word of wisdom from Manuel: "More accurately and appropriately, Rizal was a great Filipino-Chinese . . . or a great Filipino or Philippineasian or Austronesian, or a great Mongoloid or Asian. For there is no such thing as Malay race."

For his perseverance in plowing under such pernicious concepts in the academe, UGAT presented Manuel a plaque expressing the anthropologists' testament of gratitude, probably along with the hope of trying to refine his other views — until national culture and consciousness becomes more crystallized among most Filipinos.

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