

On Cultural Pluralism & Nationhood

UGAT President's Address

By Imelda Villaluz

For the first time in its twelve-year history, UGAT, that is, the Ugnayang Pang-Aghamtao, also known as the Anthropological Association of the Philippines, is holding what it usually reserves as its annual National Conference for its general assembly in the company of non-UGAT members. Being positive has repeatedly proved to be best, so we amend that to say, with potential UGAT members. This is all propitious. UGAT was organized precisely to be of service to our community at large, and has been dedicated to this goal from the beginning. Today's pleasant sight of different sectors of our society including UGAT members, grouped together to realize a common goal is another of those concrete signs that in our society we are mutually reaching out and striving to create the ideal conditions we deem we all deserve for ourselves and the future.

We are uncertain that we know each other well enough to maximize the psychological fruits we hope to reap during this two-day conference. We in UGAT would like therefore to introduce at least what we aspire to be our collective personality to all of you, our friends, who are here today. We should like to do so specially as we are the source of and hold responsibility for the concept of this Conference.

UGAT is a national organization of professionals and students supportive of anthropology as a discipline and of anthropological issues. We believe in the virtues of unity as an organization, but not for the simple sake of homogenizing and flattening ideas and opinions. We are concerned rather to strengthen and expand insight with its consequent action, inevitably through opposition and difference.

UGAT's organization twelve years ago was itself a product of the insight, mainly, of a noted anthropologist. The end he had in mind was to thrust anthropology and anthropologists in the national arena where strength of idea and will determine outcome ultimately for our national community.

Our reason for being therefore lies in striving to play a role of consequence in two general areas. One is advocacy and development work. In our country where it is degradation's face one is excruciatingly forced to see everyday of his life, there is at least comfort in the thought that there is a surge of cause-oriented groups now involved in this type of work. Through

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we in UGAT range ourselves along with the kind of support groups guided by the ideal of empowering communities to manage, determine and take responsibility for the state of their lives – their food, their health, their education, their thoughts, their involvement in the dynamics of local and national political life.

The other area we are involved in has to do with the more conceptual, more academic aspect of anthropology. Hence, conferences such as this one, lectures, round-table discussions are organized.

The fact is indicative of the expanse of human life and culture that everything is useful to an anthropologist. Every fact is grist for the anthropologist's mill, including information gathered from other social scientists and men and women of letters. The anthropologist extracts from these materials their anthropological utility. In adverting to the academic side to the discipline of anthropology, we hasten to add that the clarification of thought is gratifying in itself, and, more, it proffers practical utility in the common world of human beings. Conversely, the everyday world is the context, the foundation, and the fiscalizer of thought. Action and thought, in other words, stand in a mutually enriching tension. The two areas of involvement of UGAT therefore relate in fruitful symbiosis.

As social scientists in UGAT, we opt to uphold the principle of humanism. The human being for us is the first and primary value. This principle is the lodestar in our mental work as we seek to shed light on human reality and detail, as well as in our action projects, for which reason we exert effort to restore to the disenfranchised the right to feel and exercise themselves as human subjects and human resources.

In what way is this introduction of UGAT helpful in accounting for the theme as well as the rationale of this year's National Conference?

By way of summary, UGAT is a national organization of social scientists with a humanistic approach, concerned with explicating thought on human life and culture especially that of the Filipino, and translating them to practical action in the context of Philippine conditions. We add to this the given that we have not only a national problem of identity but a national problem of multi-sectoral conflict and rancor, the two far from

being unrelated. As Filipinos, UGAT's priority is to assist in clarifying and seeking this identity and extracting from there possible action solutions by which we can live peacefully and breathe freely, to create a culture more deserving of the epithet, "human". Hence, this Conference.

That having been explained, a look at the Conference's rationale and theme themselves is now in order.

This Conference is of the kind that totalizes experience – in this case, the Philippine cultural experience. It is an application to the Philippines of the everlasting question of man's total human relationship with his environment, with other men, with the world beyond his immediate experience, and so with himself, all these exerting mutual influence on one another. It is therefore in principle an inquiry into every imaginable aspect of human life – the political, the economic, the religious, the philosophical, the educational, the psychological, the symbolic, the linguistic and so on.

Who are we? What are we like? Not enough is known of ourselves by ourselves. The conference is therefore an exercise towards the attainment of our self-consciousness, our self-knowledge as a people, or a stock-taking of how far this exists at all.

It is an outstanding anthropological fact that as a people, we have not even at this time reconstructed enough the configurations and interrelations of the rich diversity of cultures that began to take root in our land in precolonial times.

With the onslaught of colonial powers, this ethnic plurality was overlaid with other forms of cultural differentiation, namely, the gradients of classes whose lower limits at present include most members of our indigenous communities and the sectors of industrial labor and landless peasantry, and culminating in the class of a very wealthy few. Because they are basically differentiated by access to economic means, the classes come to form distinct cultural or life conditions that in a remarkable number of ways are easily predictable, from the food they eat to their mental conceptions of their efficacy in society.

In the pursuit of their material interests, the colonial powers saw to it that they sowed division and rancor among the population they found here, pitting sectors and communities against one another. Where they did not, these cleavages came to be as a necessary consequence of their presence.

Today, we continue to live our lives as these very cultural splinters. Our indigenous cultural communities are minoritized and marginalized, gingerly dealt with as outcasts by the general population who were co-opted into serving the interests and in the process imbibing the ways and identity of the wreckers of havoc. Today, hardly anyone cares to know who they are, what they are, let alone recognize their full humanity. We forget all too easily that exactly *like us*, they are human groups in dynamic relationship with their respective physical and social environments, and as such, shape and mold their own distinctive lifeways and identities *the way we do*. Because of their intimacy with the conditions of their cultural life, *the way we are with our own*, they evolve their own expertises which may not be ours and vice versa. What's more, they too have their human failings, *exactly* the way we do. The interethnic reality is such misfortune that certain cultures are loathed for the simple reason that they are unlike the beholder. In the Philippines, it is double jeopardy for our indigenous peoples when we recall that they are the unbroken bearers of our early origins. This is true culturally and still to a discernible extent, genetically. They were the ones who disdained assimilation with the pretenders who came to suck the fat from our land. And today, having refused the type of worldly ethic thanks to which this planet is presently choking to death, they hold much of the lore by which to remedy the devastating effects of the reign of the very cultures they repudiated early on.

The situation of silent and open hostility is so unbearable that among our Muslim and Cordillera communities, the accrued psychological pains and practical disadvantages have inspired movements for political autonomy and in certain cases, the more extreme one of separatism. As for labor and capital, and peasant and landlord in our country, the clash and conflict that are a necessary feature of the socio-economic structure implanted by our colonizers, are nothing if not crystal clear. The movements that have become the expression of the lower classes' wish for liberation from the dominance and oppression of the wealthy are now to us all too familiar.

These then are symptomatic of the fact that we are a large, overarching, but fractured community. In fact, a community with multiple fractures. Despite our prehistory of contact and

commerce, and our continuing social and economic relations, there is lacking a warm and comfortable sense of belonging to one community, one nation.

On the whole, consciousness itself of living in a body politic goes no farther than the local village, or at most the region. It is moreover true that even in small communities, self-reflective awareness of the nature and complexities of one's local culture is such that he is as yet remote from realizing that he is the maker and the changer of it. With these premises, it is small wonder that there is absence among us of the sentiment of being one people.

The mission of Philippine anthropology therefore is twofold: to reconstruct the culture of our past, and to clarify the cultures of our present as they are continuations of our past but now bear the imprints and responses to a powerful, shared experience, colonization. The two together are instruments for us to crystallize our collective self and soul, which in turn will enable us to rationally calculate our possibilities for the future.

Already, the extant body of works on the subject has established a remarkable flow of social and material commerce among us in the distant past. The trend is likewise incontrovertible that there exist certain essential commonalities in the effects upon us and the ways in which we have responded to our colonial experience, while these are made alive and humanly true by their expression in the uniquenesses of particular communities and particular sectors.

The fact that we created among us a more genial pre-colonial social world than colonial and neo-colonial; and the fact that it is possible to draw above and beyond our divergencies and particularities a body of commonalities in our past and in our present are indications of our deep potential for nationhood, while preserving and appreciating what aspects of pluralism we must. The question only remains of *when* the mirror of ourselves will become clear enough for us to see the image reflected there just as clearly.

At the end of this two-day conference, we hope only two things: one, that UGAT shall have moved every participant, UGAT member or potential one, an iota closer to breathing in the mirror, and then wiping away the obstructions that mar our cognition of the image it promises to reveal. This can be

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accomplished even by opposition and difference. And, two, that our potential members fulfill this particular possibility so that with our greater numbers, we shall become ever more equal to the labor of clearing the mirror.

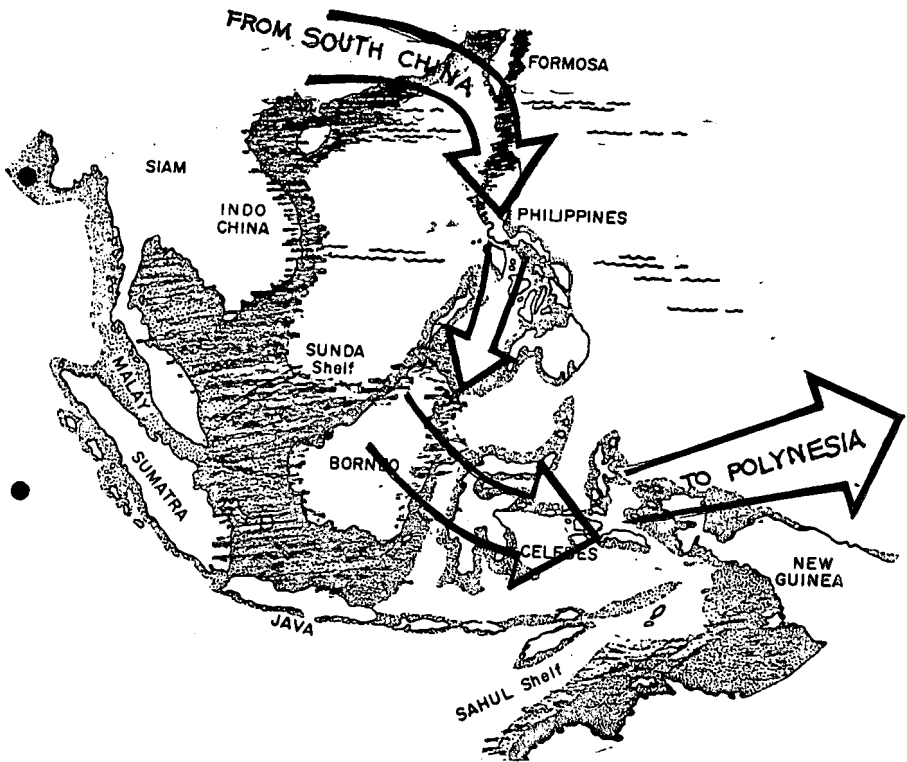
At this point, I wish to express my personal thanks to certain individuals.

For realizing that government must take a serious hand in the discourse on our national being by cooperating and supporting this conference, and in the process making available to the private sector the facilities of what is known as the state, and thereby providing the most glamorous accommodations UGAT has so far seen: the Honorable Secretary Peter Garrucho, and the Honorable Undersecretary Narzalina Z. Lim of the Department of Tourism, and Executive Director Apolonio B. Anota Jr. of the Nayong Pilipino Foundation, Inc.

For continuing the UNESCO Culture Committee's concern and support of projects of the nature of this conference, Prof. Virgie Moreno, Chairperson of the UNESCO Culture Committee.

For the original insight and will to action in organizing the Ugnayang Pang-Aghamtao Prof. Ponciano L. Bennagen.

And most certainly, all our participants, for their interest and presumably, their promise of dedicating at least part of themselves to the national issue addressed by this Conference.



Instead of the ethnolinguistic label "Malay" or "Malayo-Polynesian," the more appropriate term for Philippine groups is "Philippinesian" since this archipelago was first settled by prehistoric migrants from Asia Mainland before ever reaching Malaya or Indonesia, according to Dr. E. Arsenio Manuel. Shaded parts show the "land corridors" while the arrows trace a major migration route.