

ALFREDO ESGUERRA EVANGELISTA: ESSENTIAL ARCHAEOLOGIST

Jesus T. Peralta

He lectures though clenched lips in a monotonous drone that drives his students frantic in their desperate attempts to get at the core of his words. They had to, in order to get gems of insights into theoretical aspects of archaeology, Philippine prehistory and even ethnography. Struggling through their impending stupor, propping up their eyelids with visible optical muscular contractions. This reluctant lecturer is rather more of a field archeologist than a classroom habitué, this is why his excavation trowel (he insists on a Marshalltown, Iowa) in its wooden sheath carved by a Tagbanwa with his name written in ancient script, is now on exhibit in the archaeological display hall of the National Museum, he being the model of the essential field archaeologist that the Philippines has produced. His classes would have been shunned entirely by students for their sheer drabness, except for his reputation in the discipline, and the drollness of much of his off-colored jokes (that practically streams even from his subconscious, as if it were accessioned and indexed) – more so after a session with brewed and fermented malt and barley.

His formal education in the discipline of archaeology was at the University of the East under Wilhelm G. Solheim in the 1950s, together with E. Arsenio Manuel who went on to join the faculty of Anthropology of the University of the Philippines while he (Fred) joined the Anthropology Division of the National Museum in 1951 as a laboratory helper. It was in 1955 that he was elevated to the position of Junior Scientist in the same division. It was not until 1957 that his discipline was recognized and he was appointed Anthropologist with the magnificent salary of P2,883 per annum.

In 1959 he pursued a masteral course in Anthropology at the University of Chicago, Illinois, in the Philippine Studies Program, under a Fulbright program. He then took a break from the National Museum to join the faculty of Anthropology in the University of the Philippines as an Assistant Professor from 1967 to 1973 handling Philippine prehistory and the archaeology of Southeast Asia, Polynesia and Melanesia. It was during this period that the summer field school program of UP was undertaken jointly

with the National Museum for many years – when he acquired the kinship sobriquet of “Lolo Fred” from the anthropology students, while the anthropology staff of the National Museum were lovingly referred to as “the Museum People”.

In 1969 he received a scholarship that enabled him to pursue a doctoral course at the Anthropology Department of the University of Hawaii. While he finished all the academic requirements, he was unable to complete his dissertation due to the workload when he rejoined the National Museum as Assistant Director in 1973, a position he served until 1989, after which he was appointed Director III which position he held until his retirement in 1991. Through all the years he was with the National Museum there was no recorded leave of absence incurred by him even if only for a day, even if during his last years in the Museum, he suffered continually from various forms of illness.

After his retirement and in spite of his being quite ill, he taught an introductory course in archaeology at the graduate School of the University of Sto. Tomas, Cultural Heritage Studies Program, that his expertise may be taken advantage of by students while he was still alive. After a year of this, he was forced to withdraw to complete retirement due to advancing debilitation. He died on October 18, 2008, at the age of 82 at his home in San Pedro, Laguna.

During his time, he was the most renowned of Filipino archaeologists and had friends in Southeast Asia, Japan, the United States and Europe. When news of his death widely spread, Japanese archaeologists came to the Philippines, even after his burial to, as they put it, “worship at his grave”.

Many of Evangelista's discoveries are regarded as some of the most important archeological finds in the history of the Philippines. He has participated in all the major archaeological excavations in the Philippines and in many sites in Southeast Asia. His major achievements include the earliest known Neolithic primary burial site – the Duyong Cave in western Palawan, which has a Carbon-14 date of 4850-4400 B.C. and yielded the earliest evidence for the presence of betel-nut chewing in the country. He was also responsible for the discovery of the famous Calatagan Pot that contained the enigmatic paleograph on its shoulder that still remains undeciphered today. This pot has since then been declared a National Cultural Treasure under the provisions of National Museum laws. There are at least three other National Cultural Treasures under his belt: The Yuan Dynasty celadon jar in the collection of the National Museum, of which there are only two others in the world; the two pieces of Banton island cloth – the earliest known pieces of

textiles in the country dating to about the 13th-14th century; and the Laguna Copperplate circa 1000 AD, a quit-claim - that is considered the earliest known legal document in the country. The document records Tondo as already existing then with titled rulers. The copperplate is now housed in the National Museum of the Philippines.

He has quite a number of publications noted for their meticulous detail and precision of language, covering not only archaeology but also Philippine ethnography. The last of his publications is a compilation of his selected works, entitled, *Soul Boats: a Filipino Journey of Self-discovery*, published by the National Commission for Culture and the Arts, in 2001.

His late evening archaeology classes at the University of Sto. Tomas were usually punctuated by beer-drinking sessions organized by his students, he being known for his "pampagana". That is why one cannot help musing with misgivings about that line in a Tagalog song - "Walang beer sa langit".



Jess Peralta and Fred Evangelista, in Fred's house, about a year before he died

✉ **Jesus T. Peralta.** Consultant, National Commission for Culture and the Arts. Email: <drjperalta@yahoo.com>