

Column for Manila Bulletin
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Of Trees and Forest

A Call for Cultural Renaissance

MANILA, Philippines — Culture is one term that cannot be defined and understood in just a few words.

Culture, according to the Roshan Cultural Heritage Institute, is a collection of traits that differentiate humans from animals, including the following: language, arts and sciences, thought, social activity or shared pursuits, and interaction or the social aspects of human contact.

The United Nations Educational, Social, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) states that culture is the "set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features of society or a social group and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs."

By any definition, the Philippines is rich in culture not only because of our varied ethnic origins but also because of our long history of contacts with other people. For example, the traditional Philippine dances, like the "tinikling" and "pandanggo sa ilaw," are a unique mix of Spanish, Malay, and Muslim influences. There are also local variations of the Spanish "habanera," "jota," and the fan dance.

The Philippines is an Asian country, but our culture reflects the influences from European, American, and Latin American countries. Even our language has been enriched by words from other languages, primarily Spanish, Chinese and English.

In my previous column, I discussed our inherent artistic talents as a rich resource and an inherent advantage that we could, and should, tap for economic benefits.

Considering that art is among the traits that make up culture, it can also be part of a wider and more ambitious campaign: A cultural renaissance.

I also noted the lack of coordinated effort to promote the Philippines as a design hub. Similarly, I believe we are not promoting Philippine culture enough to enhance our country's image and boost our attractiveness in the tourism industry.

We have a problem with attitude. A lot of people see spending for cultural promotion as a waste of resources, which they say should be channeled to poverty-alleviation measures.

Previous administrations had tolerated such attitude, and endeavors to promote Philippine culture suffered from lack of funding and other support. It has been a heroic effort for the few private organizations that continue to launch cultural performances in other countries using their own resources.

Some people dismiss cultural activities as only for the rich, but for me, culture is the soul of our country. Culture is what makes us Filipino, and we should be proud of our own culture.

And yet, promoting culture does not require massive resources. The first step, in my view, is for the government to declare as a national priority the promotion of Philippine

culture. I would suggest the adoption of “cultural renaissance” as the working title for such a program.

We have numerous museums, both private and public (sadly, public museums need more support), which can be marketed to local and foreign visitors.

Schools are a rich ground for promoting culture and enriching our youth’s cultural awareness, without spending a lot. For instance, if schools find it difficult to teach English poetry, why not poetry in Tagalog, Cebuano, Ilocano, or in any of our native languages?

Most schools already have programs that promote Philippine culture, like our native dances and songs. Many of our towns, cities, and provinces already benefit from promoting their indigenous culture like folk dances during their annual fiestas, which attract tourists – who stimulate local businesses.

All this, in my view, is what will make cultural renaissance a rewarding program for our economy, which should in turn correct some people’s wrong attitude toward culture.

Cultural festivals are among the most attractive events for visitors from other countries because these events give them better perspective and appreciation for their host countries.

Thus, cultural renaissance can be an important part of our tourism promotion program. If we can be a global design capital, we can also be world-famous for our unique and colorful culture.

It may take us some time to move up in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) ladder in terms of growth. If we wait until we get rich before we pay attention to our culture, we may be too late: we may have lost our soul as a nation.

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