

THREE

Notes on Folklore and Social Criticism

Introduction

Let me preface these Notes by re-stating a folk saying: "We have beaten the carabao dead, and we keep on beating it." While it seems we have done just that to Folklore over the years, I assure you that Folklore is still alive, and has continuously given us reason to be interested in it, even as we are now on the Fifth Quadrennial Congress concerned with the need to re-examine its role and function in our society in the light of what the Steering Committee of the current meeting believes folklore scholarship today should address. Allow me to quote from this Committee's statement of the theme, thus,

The theme was chosen because we feel that discussion of folklore research today should be responsive to the current Philippine social situation, one marked by stress and conflict, as well as one which calls for the informed criticism of society and insights into emerging or alternative sociomoral orders. We do not, in this wise, make any ostentatious claim for the Congress, or folklore study for that matter, but simply affirm that collective reflection on the above issue should be productive.

The theme was also chosen for reasons germane to the discipline itself. In Philippine folkloristics, more attention needs to be directed towards the problems of folklore's context and use. In this respect, we need to attend to the function of folklore in criticism, conflict and change, in view of the fact that the mass of scholarship has gravitated towards heightening the values of social validation, legitimation, control, conservation and continuity.

With that as a background let me review the traditional if classical, functions of folklore according to the leading folklorists, among whom is William R. Bascom in Alan Dundes, The Study of Folklore. Englewood Cliffs, N.J. Prentice Hall Inc. 1965) whose description of the functions and roles of folklore has become

standard for every student. [For detailed discussions of these functions, see Essay 2 in this volume.]

A seemingly radical, if novel, view of the function/role of folklore is seen in what I identified in an essay presented to the 1976 National Folklore Congress, that of its role in change. In that essay I wrote:

.... the anthropologist discovered an unknown field where folklore can be used in the process of modernization. It may be safe to assume that the anthropologist himself was just testing an idea and did not expect to effect a whole new view or perception of a peoples' understanding of their own environment, particularly the spirit environment. In other words, folklore need not function only to entertain, or to maintain stability in a society, or to justify human relations with one another and with the unseen spirits, or to educate the people that possess such folk beliefs to preserve their culture.

It can function also as an agent of change (see Essay 2 in this volume).

Folklore As/And Social Criticism

In the presentation of the classical/traditional functions/roles of folklore, the theme of our Congress, folklore as social criticism, does not seem evident at all. However, if we examine these functions/roles very closely, there will emerge a very clear manifestation of social criticism as a function namely, **social control**.

One may raise, of course, the question: "would social criticism have its roots in social control, as we see it from the view provided us by folklore?" I am inclined to respond to this question in the affirmative. In very traditional societies, for instance, "to chide an aberrant conduct by inquiring seethingly of the transgressor, "Did you have no grandparent to tell you the stories?" (Bascom, in Dundes 1965: 292) certainly manifests a critical view issuing from a desire, a felt need, to control behavior - to put in proper place an aberrant conduct, by reminding one of the values of counsel derived from tradition. If we stretch this further, it puts on the critical balance the status and prestige of one's antecedents. This, indeed, becomes crucial in the maintenance of one's integrity in a given society.

Folklore in the form of "...a thinly disguised ridicule directed against undesirable traits, e.g., greed, jealousy, deceit, is a very effective mechanism for social control," (Bascom, *Ibid.*) because it is in itself a very efficient criticism of one's traits. Take, for example, the case of a Manuvu child who is rather headstrong but unable to withstand physical difficulties. For this he is criticized or ridiculed by being addressed with a proverb - "You know it is pepper, yet you eat it, so do not grimace" (Manuel 1973:236-237). This has an effect more pungent and greater than a direct and frank critical statement no matter how well meaning, and this is especially so when dealing with elders.

A traditional society like that of the Manuvus appears to have full grasp of the meaning of social criticism in its attempt to instill upon its people conformity to its own view of stability. Comprehension of the import of the saying, "It is not like thunder which you can hear," in the context of Manuvu culture, or perhaps of contemporary Philippine society, becomes immensely meaningful in terms of the events that are now unfolding in our midst. We cannot but be cognizant of the full significance of the proverb, "We are not like a tree that can still live even if cut down," even as we know that society, like a tree, can rejuvenate itself through its succeeding generations. It lives because it can install its own mechanisms for self criticism, hence self-preservation.

Opposite social control as a social function of folklore and from which the case of folklore as social criticism derives is social protest, which indeed is another manifestation of social criticism, but of another kind because here the criticism seeks to undermine social control rather than strengthen it. Regarding the relation of folklore and social protest, one can hardly be more precise than the way Betty Wang (in Dundes 1965:309) puts it when she wrote:

...Wherever there is injustice and oppression, one can be sure that the victim will find some solace in folklore. Through jokes, songs and proverbs, the anger of the folk is vent upon the often frighteningly unassailable individual or institution. If the folkloric protest [criticism?] is permitted, it is perhaps, because, the blame for its composition usually cannot be affixed to any one person. It is a collective not an individual expression, and consequently the singer of a song of

protest[criticism?] is not to be blamed for the content of his song. He is only reporting what the folk say.

You will notice that in the citation, there is the word **criticism** with the question mark in brackets, immediately after the word **protest**. I deliberately inserted that word to underline my earlier reference that **social criticism** is of kindred spirit with **social protest**. But at this point I would like to push this further to say that **protest** and **criticism** are or could be identical in the context of my view that they are both vehicles of folkloric expressions in times of stress - political, economic and/or social. Against that background, it may not be ill-considered to proceed, with caution, to a point that in folklore, a society can bear such stresses with lighthearted feelings.

Social Control, Social Protest, Social Criticism: Some Paradigms

So far what we have cited in the earlier sections of this brief essay to illustrate the social function/role of folklore are but brief statements of wisdom or sayings. Or, are they? Well, in this section of the essay, we go on citing brief sayings, but we can add riddles and some folksongs perhaps. These will be drawn from Chinese folklore, from Philippine ethnic literature and from contemporary events.

I find it most irresistible to cite paradigms from China, in view of their relevance or perhaps their comparative contemporaneity in Philippine situation. From the time of the building of the Great Wall of China, there were songs that expressed the deep sorrows of the people, lamenting over their misfortunes. "One of these songs was known to be [that] of a young widow, whose husband only a few days after their marriage was called to enlist among the workers, to help build the wall." (Wang in Dundes 1965:311). Let us sing with her -

With flowers blooming and brides singing,
 Spring is here calling us to visit friends far and near,
 Other women are accompanied by their husbands and sons,
 Poor me, I shall go to the wall where my husband's
 bones bear,
 Great Wall! Great Wall! If you can save us from
 enemies
 Why not save first our dear ones?

Wang's commentary on the song is even more interestingly irresistible. She views the young widow's lament as -

... an expression of general feeling toward the merciless emperor. Although their hatred toward the emperor was deep and fear of his tyranny was widespread, it was beyond their power to save themselves from the dungeon by openly protesting against the king. Their suppressed desire, however, found expression in folksongs,... channels through which their souls spoke (Ibid.).

Coming nearer our time, there is a song addressed to the Manchu during the 1911 revolution in China. It is, indeed, a very interesting lyric piece which our people may find quite timely and exciting. Let us listen to the lines -

Manchu men, Manchu men, where is your face? Who says you
are big and who says you are strong?
You find now all affairs in a maze,
Soon you will leave this white mountain and royal town,
Give back our water and land
We shall keep our own precious sand, (Ibid., 312).

Coming to our shores, let me cite an Iloko saying, which to me is the best commentary of the social conditions of the time, particularly during the height of friar rule. I quote the saying in Iloko: *Aganos ka bagi, ta dika met nagpadi* (Lit. "patience body, because a priest you didn't get to be"). It was indeed a fact of the times that the peasant, the Indio, had to endure all the physical as well as the emotional and psychological difficulties imposed upon them while the priests lived in luxury and ease. They were the powers then. The saying may have its versions in the other languages of the Philippines.

Perhaps in a similar context the same saying may be known in contemporary times. So far the most classic critique of the present economic situation in the Philippines is expressed in a riddle, contemporary as it were, viz., "What is the bad news and the good news about the economy in 1985?" (*Philippine Panorama*, October 28, 1984, p. 26). The response to this riddle is equally classic, viz., "The

bad news is that 1985 will be worse than 1984, but the good news is that 1985 will be better than 1986" (Ibid.). Still on the economy, though perhaps apocryphal, the following conversation may be considered a **critique par excellence** of the situation in which we find ourselves today, viz.

Customer: Those sausages you sold me were meat
at one end and cereal at the other.

Grocer: Yes, ma'am. In these hard times it is
difficult to make both ends meet.

(Weekend, October 28, 1984, p. 24)

A folkloric political critique reflective of the sad social and economic difficulties obtaining in the Philippines today focuses in two items in a "menu" circulating among a number of restaurants on Roxas Boulevard in Manila at the height of the 1984 election campaign for members of the **Batasang Pambansa**: (a) **Utang sapin-sapin** (All year round) and (b) **Tostados Estados Unidos**. Certainly, all of us know the local Tagalog delicacy, the **sapin-sapin**, a kind of food preparation, usually for merienda, made of various layers of riceflour with different flavors, like ube, camote, etc. **Sapin** literally means "to cover; to put one over", in reduplicated form it means "one over the other" and with the word **Utang**, which means debt in all Philippine languages, it has the critical meaning of "debts galore". These terms had been coined to emphasize one of our very serious problems - our international debt, which had somehow affected our social life as a people.

Indeed, the Spanish item in the "menu", i.e. **Tostados Estados Unidos**, is not unknown to us, for its literal meaning is easily perceived. But its implications, particularly relative to the first item above cited, are quite clear in terms of our heavy "reliance" upon the U.S. for our economic well-being. In which case, we have been toasted in our own heat, or to be more precise "fried in our lard" (in Tagalog "pinirito sa sariling mantika").

These two items in the "menu" are reflective of the Filipino peoples' view that they have somehow been brought to a situation of economic and social difficulties. Such statements of rather extreme brevity underlie not only their capacity to humor themselves under extreme difficulties, but their capacity to express critical thought, as

well.

All that I have just said above could be simply regarded as gossip by those who sympathize with the establishment, to whom the Tausog would gladly give this piece of wisdom from their ancestors, viz., **Marayao pa kaw timmapa suba, ayaw simud sin tao.** In English it means "It is easier to stop the flow of the river than a person's mouth." (Bruno 1973:184) Understood in its Tausog social context, the statement means it is impossible to stop the people's mouth once they have started talking. The moral: Don't give reason for people to start gossiping, especially if you are at the helm of leadership in the government. How can you stop the people's mouth from criticizing the government? For the answer, I would like to advert to another Tausog saying, this time, one that has to do with leadership, viz., **Dih malubug in sikan subah bang bukun lubug in uhan.** "The tail-end of the river will [not] be murky if the mud [does not] originate from the source" (Ibid.) Need I say more?

Concluding Remarks

Some of the paradigms that we have cited are indeed too recent, and will certainly not qualify under the tests for folkloricity set by E. Arsenio Manuel (1970:42-45). In terms, however, of the role that these paradigms have in the total perspective of our social life, particularly at these times, they indeed could qualify as folklore. In fact they have already been accepted in the main stream of Philippine folk literature. The events that precipitated the composition of these folk saying, riddles, and plain statements, implying some kind of protest, will certainly provide the force that will preserve them in the collective memory of the people, who are the direct heirs of literature. And this is not an isolated situation. The parallel or analogous development in Philippine history is not too remote in time past, e.g. the friar tales, that had been told and retold over those years during the more than three centuries of friar rule in the country are still recalled vividly, as if these tales were told just yesterday. Of course, the friars are still with us and I cannot but repeat here once more the Iloko saying - **ala aganos ka bagi, ta dika met nagpadi.** Indeed, there are hundreds of these types of sayings from various linguistic groups of the Philippines.

It is most difficult to write a conclusion of a paper that deals with a cultural phenomenon which is in the state of constant flux; and hence, developing almost to infinity. For as long as man lives in a world where interaction is inevitable, his literature, be it oral and/or written, becomes a record of his thoughts, his aspirations, his continuing exploration of the word beyond his immediate world. He will never be static, and being such, he does not die. Whatever happens within his society, he is the cause as well as the participant. And whatever reactions these events elicit will form part of his lore.

In closing, therefore, I hope I have been able to stimulate your minds regarding the main theme of our Congress through my brief discussion of the role of folklore in social criticism. I am certain that the paradigms cited, few as they are, have whetted your appetite for more active study of our oral traditions. They are very relevant to the present conditions of our country. They may be the best "weapons" for survival (See Essay 4 in this volume.) Humour, riddles, ridicule, or plain sayings whether they are in the guise of protests or critiques have somehow kept us sane.

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