

BAYANIHAN: TRADITION AND TRUTH IN DANCE

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Before Ron Quesada took Master Kalanduyan's kulintang course, Ron thought the class would be a no-brainer. He learned the music and dances of the Southern Philippines from his experience as a veteran of the PCN circuit and therefore would have no problem learning things from Master Kalanduyan.

Today, both of us are teacher assistants' of the Master Kalanduyan, helping him disseminate as much factual information about the music of the Southern Philippines, and it's only now that Ron realized how drastically PCN differentiated from the real thing.

You may ask, "How? I thought Bayanihan and Kulintang Music are one and the same."

Let us explain.

To begin our discussion, we will start off with the Bayanihan Dance Troupe, the national dance troupe of the Philippines, instituted during the 50's by former President Manuel Quezon. The concept of a national dance troupe was introduced as part of a concerted effort to increase nationalism in the Philippines, a nation whose image was still rattled by our portrayal in the 1904 World Exposition held in St. Louis. Under the guidance of the University of the Philippines' dean of the college of music, Dr. Jorge Bocobo, ethnographic research was undertaken to compile information on all the native dances of the Philippines by those attending Philippine Women's University and folks like Francisca Reyes Aquino, who published the series "Philippine Folk Dances".

The troupe's initial success at the International Festival for Dance and Music at Dacca in 1955 spurred on further research, this time in Mindanao where researchers such as Lucrecia "Inday" Reyes Urtula, began documenting the dances of the Badjao, Maranao, Maguindanao and the Bogobo. In fact, the most popular dance on their circuit came from Mindanao, a dance known as Singkil taught by Princess Tarhata Alonto of Lanao. The troupe finally reached the big time in 1958 at the Brussels World Fair Exposition where they became the only group asked to do a repeat performance at its conclusion. It was then that the Bayanihan was born, transporting such dances the world over.

As time went on, former Bayanihan members brought their musical skills to wherever they settled such as the United States, integrating and infusing much of Bayanihan tradition into Filipino American events such as Pilipino Cultural Night. With these events firmly in place, the dances spread like wildfire, breeding a whole generation of Filipino Americans trained in these traditional arts.

But what exactly was Bayanihan's definition of "traditional"? Technically speaking, it means passing on information that has been handed down orally across generations but oddly enough, these traditional dances, particularly those in the Muslim program, contained a host of "non-traditional" characteristics. For instance, among the Maranao, the sarimanok is a sacred symbol used as a sultan standard or decoration for kulintang stands but is never used as a headpiece atop a woman's head like the Bayanihan have instituted. During the dance the Singkil, men dancers appear with exposed chests and at times swing swords like a lasso, none of which has any correlation to the Maranao spear and shield dance this type

of dancing is supposed to represent. Perhaps the most blatant discrepancy of all is the Bayanihan's classification of such dances as Muslim dances. This is wrong considering these dances were pre-Islamic, arriving centuries before the Arab missionaries arrived on the shores of the Philippines.

Now, one could say that Bayanihan made such changes in order to create their own version of Singkil to better fit the audience they intended to entertain. And that would have been a fantastic reason... if only most people knew about it.

What we have found though is even our students in our kulintang class have believed that dances in the PCNs are authentic representations of dances in the Philippines, not just some rendition of them. Research we've conducted also suggest many Bayanihan terminology has encroached on the works of many scholars who studied this field, in effect misinforming readers into believing the Bayanihan's interpretation of the dances is valid.

Now, according to the Bayanihan, their purpose was to format much of our native dances to fit the setting of contemporary theater while still "keeping the richness of the native artistic traditions" intact. But exactly how much richness was sacrificed for theater? For instance, what was the theatrical purpose of changing the meaning of the dance, asik, to mean "slave" dance? According to Master Kalanduyan it's a royal dance.

These assertions by no means suggest Bayanihan didn't play an important role in Philippine history. Through their incredible work, the troupe was able to take our native dances and bring them onto the world stage for all to see. That alone was an incredible

accomplishment.

However we do suggest that, if they are to claim these as authentic dances coming from their respective regions of origin, it is important that their audience should know the truth. People who watch these dances should be informed that many of the dances have changes so people wouldn't naively think that these dances are done the same way in Lanao or the Sulu. Either that or those participating in PCNs should adjust their dances to make them conform to the authentic Maranao or Tausug traditions they are intent on keeping, negating the need for a disclaimer.

It is hoped that those who participate in PCNs understand it is vital that the distinction between what's Bayanihan and what is originally from the South be clearly stated. Otherwise, a new generation of Filipinos would crop up believing they are learning an "authentic" tradition, not realizing how drastically it strays from the truth.

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