

*The Role of Arts in Preserving/Transforming National Identity in Times of Change: Filipino Context*

Jove Jim S. Aguas, University of Santo Tomas, Philippines

The Asian Conference on Ethics, Religion & Philosophy 2018  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

The identity of a people or nation is dynamic and continuously undergoes transformation. Given the constantly changing political, social, cultural and even economic environment the crucial question is how can a people or nation's identity be preserved and transformed in the midst of all these changes. While national identity has some core elements it cannot remain static amidst external influences. These external influences bring about changes that can have a positive and a negative effect on a nation's identity. One aspect of the identity of a nation is its arts which expresses in a creative and aesthetic manner the nation's core values, ideals and aspirations. In sense it is a part of the cultural heritage of a people and expresses its very identity. In this paper I will focus on the role of arts in preserving and transforming the national identity in times of change. In this context I will discuss what I consider as the three fundamental functions of arts vis-à-vis national identity, namely, the expressive, hermeneutic (interpretation) and critical functions. Fundamentally arts express and manifest national identity through creative, imaginative, aesthetic and technical skills. Arts as interpretation forms and redefines the national identity through meaning generation/interpretation. Arts as critique allows a people to have a critical look at themselves and examine the external factors that influence their national identity allowing them to preserve their national identity and enabling them to integrate the positive things from these external influences. As an application I will highlight Filipino arts and identity.

Keywords: arts, national identity, arts as expression, arts as hermeneutics, arts as critique

**iafor**

The International Academic Forum  
[www.iafor.org](http://www.iafor.org)

## **Introduction**

The identity of a people or nation is dynamic and continuously undergoes transformation; it is constantly being transformed and redefined both by factors within the nation itself and by factors that are outside of it. There is always some kind of integration of the internal and external factors. The values and beliefs systems for example and the internal dynamics within a particular society constantly interact with the external factors – political, social, technological and economic. Hence, a national identity cannot be static, whether a particular nation likes it or not there will be external forces that will influence it and will eventually cause some changes in its character. But there will always be a core of such identity that will remain despite the external influences. There may be some transformation but the essential will remain at the same. While national identity has some core elements it cannot remain static amidst external influences. Now, given the constantly changing political, social, cultural and even economic environment the crucial question is how can a people or nation's essential identity be preserved and at the same time be transformed in the midst of all these changes. These external influences bring about changes that can have a positive and a negative effect on a nation's identity. One aspect of the identity of a nation is its arts which expresses in a creative and aesthetic manner the nation's core values, ideals and aspirations. In sense it is a part of the cultural heritage of a people and expresses its very identity. In this paper I will focus on the role of arts in preserving and transforming the national identity in times of change. In this context I will discuss what I consider as the three fundamental functions of arts vis-à-vis national identity, namely, the expressive, hermeneutic (interpretation) and critical functions. Fundamentally arts express and manifest national identity through creative, imaginative, aesthetic and technical skills. Arts as interpretation forms and redefines the national identity through meaning generation/interpretation. Arts as critique allows a people to have a critical look at themselves and examine the external factors that influence their national identity allowing them to preserve their national identity and enabling them to integrate the positive things from these external influences. As an application I will highlight Filipino arts and identity.

## **The Meaning of Art**

Art is the creative expression of one's self. It is a form of creative human expression that enriches the human experience. It is one of the conditions of human life and an indispensable means of interconnection or relations between man and man. The great Russian literary writer Leo Tolstoy in his essay "What is Art" writes: "Every work of art causes the receiver to enter into a certain kind of relationship both with him who produced, or is producing, the art, and with all those who, simultaneously, previously, or subsequently, receive the same artistic impression."<sup>1</sup> Like speech, art serves as a means of communication between or among men; the difference is that while in speech we communicate usually our thoughts in art we communicate our feeling or emotions. Tolstoy explains, "The activity of art is based on the fact that a man, receiving through his sense of hearing or sight another man's expression of feeling, is

---

<sup>1</sup> Leo Tolstoy, "What is Art?" Chapter 5, #2. Accessed from, <http://gbelic.org/courses/representation-language/readings/tolstoy-whatisart.pdf>. March 1, 2018.

capable of experiencing the emotion which moved the man who expressed it.”<sup>2</sup> Hence, art is that human activity by which a person, having experienced an emotion, intentionally transmits it to others.

When a man is excited or irritated and through his gestures or movements or sound of his voice another man upon seeing or hearing him comes to a similar state of mind, or when a man expresses courage and determination or sadness and calmness, and this state of mind is passed on to others, or when a man suffers, expressing his sufferings by groans and spasms, and this suffering transmits itself to other people, or when a man expresses his feeling of admiration, devotion, fear, respect, or love to certain objects, persons, or phenomena, and other men are affected by the same feelings of admiration, devotion, fear, respect, or love to the same objects, persons, and phenomena, then there is the manifestation of art. Hence, for Tolstoy, it is “upon this capacity of man to receive another man's expression of feeling and experience those feelings himself, that the activity of art is based.”<sup>3</sup>

But not every infection of human reaction is art. If one laughs and another one cannot help but also laugh such cannot be considered an art. According to Tolstoy art “begins when one person, with the object of joining another or others to himself in one and the same feeling, expresses that feeling by certain external indications.”<sup>4</sup> If a boy tells his story about some fearful experience and by his creative story telling he was able to express his fear and his terrible experience and he is able to compel through his creative narration his audience to feel the same feeling then there is the experience of art. In a similar way there is art when a man, having experienced suffering or enjoyment whether in real life or simply on his imagination expresses these feelings on canvas or in marble so that others are infected by them. There is also art when a man feels or imagines to himself feelings of delight, gladness, sorrow, despair, courage, or despondency and the transition from one to another of these feelings, and expresses these feelings through music or dances or by other theatrical performances that the listeners or the audience are infected by them and experience them as they were experienced by the performers.

According to Tolstoy the activity of art then is “to evoke in oneself a feeling one has once experienced, and having evoked it in oneself, then, by means of movements, lines, colors, sounds, or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling that others may experience the same feeling.”<sup>5</sup> Because of man’s capacity to be infected with the feelings of others by means of art, all that is being lived through by his contemporaries and those feelings experienced by men in the past are all accessible to him. And by means of art the present man has also the possibility of transmitting his own feelings to others even in the future.

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., #4.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., #5.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., #7.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., #10.

## The Nature of Arts

While art is the creative expression of one self whereby a man is able to communicate his feelings and evoke the same feelings on others the Arts is the creative, imaginative and aesthetic body of human activities and works which manifests a people's collective experiences and feelings. But what are manifested in these collective feelings are their core values, ideals, beliefs, practices and aspirations.

According to Tolstoy we are accustomed to understand art to be only what we hear and see in theaters, concerts, and exhibitions, together with buildings, statues, poems, novels. However, this is but a small part of what they try to communicate with each other in real life. Tolstoy expresses that all human life is filled with works of art of every kind - from cradlesong, jest, mimicry, the ornamentation of houses, dress, and utensils, up to church services, buildings, monuments, and triumphal processions. It is all artistic activity. However, not every human activity that transmits feelings can be considered a part of the arts of a people but only those for some reasons we attach special importance.<sup>6</sup> And the reason why we attached a special importance to them is because they manifest our core values, ideals, beliefs and aspirations as a people. The Arts as a body of creative works is a mode of depicting a culture from all over the world. When we see for example the body paintings of certain tribes we get a glimpse of their practices which could be rooted to their values and ideals and culture. The arts are essential ingredients to empowering the hearts of people.

## The Filipino Arts and Artists

We Filipinos are lovers of arts. Our art works cover every genre and type of arts from visual arts, performing arts, literature, textile art traditions to contemporary arts.

Juan Luna is a Filipino painter and sculptor famous for his masterpieces like the *Spoliarium*, *The Death of Cleopatra*, *The Blood Compact* and many others. Fernando Amorsolo is one of the most important artists in the history of painting in the Philippines. His art works include *The Explosion*, *Bataan*, *Dalagang Bukid*, *The Mestiza*, *Maiden in a Stream* and many more. Félix Resurrección Hidalgo is acknowledged as one of the great Filipino painters of the late 19th century. His masterpieces include *La barca de Aqueronte*, *Las Virgenes Cristianas Expuestas al Populacho*, *La Laguna Estigia* and many others. Carlos Modesto Villaluz Francisco, popularly known as Botong, was a muralist famous for such art works as *Bayanihan sa Bukid*, *Bayanihan*, *The Martyrdom of Rizal*, *Fiesta* and many more. Pacita Abad is famous for her sculpture, ceramic art and painting. Her masterpieces include *Filipina: A racial identity crisis*, *The Painted Bridge* and many others.<sup>7</sup>

Leandro V. Locsin is a well-known architect who designed the Cultural Center of the Philippines complex which includes the *Folk Arts Theatre*, *Philippine International Convention Center*, *Philcote*, and *The Westin Hotel* (now Sofitel Philippine Plaza). Catalino "Lino" Brocka is one of the greatest Filipino directors of all time. He

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., #17.

<sup>7</sup> Famous Artists from the Philippines. Accessed from, <https://www.ranker.com/list/famous-artists-from-philippines/reference>. March 30, 2018.

espoused “freedom of expression” in his films and depicting a social activist spirit. His well-known works include *Tinimbang Ka Ngunit Kulang*, *Maynila sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag*, and *Insiang*. Levi Celerio, a prolific lyricist and composer, is known for having effortlessly translating or rewriting lyrics of traditional Filipino melodies like “*O Maliwanag Na Buwan*” (Iloko), “*Ako ay May Singsing*” (Pampango), and “*Alibangbang*” (Visaya). He’s also been immortalized in the Guinness Book of World Records as the only person to make music using just a leaf. Leonor Orosa Goquingco is a pioneer Filipino choreographer known to many as “The Trailblazer,” “The Mother of Philippine Theater Dance,” and “Dean of Filipino Performing Arts Critics.” She has produced stunning choreographies during her 50-year career, highlighted by “*Filipinescas: Philippine Life, Legend, and Love*.” F. Sionil Jose is best known for creating the five-novel masterpiece known as the Rosales saga: *Poon; Tree; My Brother, My Executioner; The Pretenders; and Mass*. Lucrecia R. Kasilag is a composer, performing artist, who pioneered the fusing Filipino ethnic and Western music, helping elevate Filipino’s appreciation for music. Her best work is the prize-winning *Toccata for Percussions and Winds, Divertissement and Concertante*.<sup>8</sup>

Aside from these artists there are countless Filipinos who excel in their art works, like the weavers and pottery makers in the rural areas, the performing artists and ballet dancers in the theaters, the countless contemporary artists, the culinary artists and many more. Our arts reflect who we are as a people; they show the way we do things in our ordinary and daily life. Our visual arts reflect our core values, beliefs, practices and traditions. Decorative arts are based on our practices and traditions.

### **The Filipino Arts and National Identity**

National identity is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as the “sense of a nation as a cohesive whole, as represented by distinctive traditions, culture, and language.” It is the sense of a people as to who they are as a people based on their core values, ideals, belief systems and practices, aspirations and traditions. The national identity of a people is very much rooted in their cultural heritage which includes the works of its artists, architects, musicians, writers and scientists and also the work of other artists, which express the people's spirituality, and the body of values which give meaning to life.<sup>9</sup> Cultural heritage includes both tangible and intangible works through which the creativity of that people finds expression like languages, rites, beliefs, historic places and monuments, literature, works of art, etc.<sup>10</sup> All these works embody the cultural value of a people. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) provided a more extensive definition when it says: “In its widest sense, culture may now be said to be the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or

---

<sup>8</sup> Who’s Who: National Artists of the Philippines. Accessed from, <http://primer.com.ph/tips-guides/2016/07/27/whos-who-national-artists-of-the-philippines/>. March 30, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> See UNESCO Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies, World Conference on Cultural Policies Mexico City, 26 July – 6 August 1982. [http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/files/12762/11295421661mexico\\_en.pdf/mexico\\_en.pdf](http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/files/12762/11295421661mexico_en.pdf/mexico_en.pdf). – accessed 17 October 2014),

<sup>10</sup> See Jove Jim S. Aguas. “Cultural Pluralism and Cultural Dialogue.” in *Overlapping Territories: Asian Voices on Culture and Civilization* (ed. by Bambang Sugiharto & Roy Voragen. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), p. 107.

social group. It includes not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, there is an intimate relation between the national and cultural identity of a people and this is more particularly seen in our case as Filipinos. Our national identity is very much rooted in our cultural identity so that to speak of the Filipino national identity is also to speak of the Filipino cultural identity. In our case as Filipinos such sense of national identity reflects the wide range of our cultural influences, pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial roots, religions and traditions. For us Filipinos the close relation between our national and cultural identity and our arts is seen in the way we express or portray our core values, belief systems, practices and traditions in our art works. Even our history is usually expressed through our arts.

Our core values of personalism, loyalty and hospitality, closed family ties and solidarity, social cohesion (*pakikipagkapwa* and *pakikisama*), gratitude and shame (*utang na loob* and *hiya*), spirituality and religiosity, hard work and perseverance, patriotism and respect for elders are usually portrayed or are the subject of our arts – fine arts, performance arts, literature arts and even contemporary arts. Our songs, music and dances express our core values and belief systems. Our belief systems are usually portrayed or are the subject of our arts – fine arts like painting, graphic arts. Our literature arts like novels and poems contain expressions of our core values and beliefs. Our performance arts like songs, music, dances, theater express our traditions.

Through music our ancestors passed their time with their songs that express their emotions. We express our thoughts, our aspirations, our ideals through music. Our music is romantic and patriotic, idealistic and practical. Indeed we love music. This is very much evident during family gatherings where the videoke is a permanent feature. We sing to our souls' content. Various string and wind musical instruments can be seen in almost all communities. We are good musicians and singers and our music manifests our distinct Filipino identity. Our songs range from folk to pop; classic *kundiman* to modern music. Aside from singing we Filipinos also love to dance. Dancing is the moving spirit among many Filipinos and this clearly seen in the various festivals and celebrations. – fiestas, Christmas, New Year, etc. Even religious rituals are commemorated through dances. Our indigenous dances represent our relations with one another and with nature. Our dances reflect our Malay, Muslim, Spanish, and American influences.

We love to tell stories. Our ancestors tell corridos that narrate their stories and read stories about the bravery of legendary heroes. The Zarzuela and the moro-moro are forms of art which depicted the life of the people.

Our architecture reflects our past especially during the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. Our churches were built by the Spaniards with the help of the Filipinos. These structures built in Baroque style with elaborate curved arches, altars and images of saints. Our simple architecture is also reflected in our houses, like the Nipa hut and

---

<sup>11</sup> UNESCO Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies, World Conference on Cultural Policies Mexico City, 26 July - 6 August 1982.

the arrangements we have in our homes. The *Bahay Kubo* is an iconic symbol of our culture and architecture. It embodies many of our values. Its simple architecture exemplifies the simple Filipino lifestyle; its materials, design and ornaments say a lot about Filipino ingenuity and adaptability. Inside the *Bahay Kubo* there is hardly any partition, except in some designs where there is a partition between the living room and the bedroom, which allows the members of the Filipino family to gather together for all their household activities. This shows the Filipino value of close family ties. Tourists cannot miss the Philippine Jeepney, one of the primary modes of transportation in the Philippines. The Jeepney is an iconic symbol of Filipino's creativity and personality. Its design is a combination artistry, wit, flamboyancy and practicality.

### **The Role of Arts in Preserving and Transforming National Identity**

We now go back to the main question posed at the beginning of this paper. Given the constantly changing political, social, cultural and even economic environment the crucial question is how can a people or nation's essential identity be preserved and at the same time be transformed in the midst of all these changes? As mentioned one aspect of the identity of a nation is its arts which expresses in a creative and aesthetic manner the nation's core values, ideals and aspirations. The emerging realities in the contemporary world like globalization and regional integration could have either positive or negative effects in a nation's cultural values and national identity. I think the arts has a role to play in preserving and at the same time transforming the national identity of a people. This role is based on what I consider to be the three functions of arts, namely, expressive, hermeneutic and critical.

***Expressive Function*** - Arts expresses first of all the subjectivity (thoughts, moods, emotions of the artist). Such subjectivity may be rooted in the artist's values, ideals social and cultural background. The Filipino as an artist expresses his own subjectivity through his arts. Arts can also express the collective experiences, the thoughts, values, ideals and aspirations of a social group, e.g. community, race, nation. Literature, visual and performing arts are forms of art that can fully express the values and ideals, culture of a people. Our arts are not just expressions of our values, beliefs, practices and traditions, they are also expressions of our talents, skills and abilities. Filipino arts is a showcase of the ingenuity, the passion, the talents of the Filipino.

***Hermeneutic*** – Art Interpretation - An art could convey different meanings to different audience. A good art is transcendent in the sense that its meaning is not bound by time and space. An art can provoke discussion among different individuals. According to Childe Hassam an American Artist, art is interpretation of the impression which nature makes upon the eye and the brain. Man Ray says "Nature does not create works of art. It is we and the faculty of interpretation peculiar to the human mind that sees the art.

But art can also be used by the artist to convey his own interpretation of reality and life. This is the notion of art as interpretation. An artist may have his own particular view of an event or subject or of life itself and he can use art to convey that interpretation of reality. Of course his interpretation is also subject to the

interpretation of this audience. In Arts there is a “fusion of horizons” of the artist and his audience. While the artist uses art to interpret a particular reality, his art is also interpreted by his audience, so that art appreciation results in kind of “fusion of horizons.”

***Critical Function*** - An art always convey a message and the message could have political, social or cultural meaning or significance. Arts can instigate, it can provoke, it can criticize. An artist can use his art to instigate, to question an event, an issue, reality or life itself, etc. But the art itself can also evoke criticism and can stir the emotions of the audience. Some arts are in fact used to criticize a particular program or event or situation. Some of our Literature and visual arts and even performing arts are media of critique. Criticism could be bi-directional; it could be directed internally and externally. Internal criticism is when the art causes the individual to look into himself and make some sort of self-examination. External criticism is when the art causes one to critique prevailing situations or events.

## **Conclusion**

In this time of change there are essential things that need to remain because they provide an anchor to one’s identity. But one also has to reinvent and transform himself if only to remain attuned with the time. As far as the Filipino national identity is concerned the arts has an important role to play. Arts expresses and manifest our national identity through our creative, imaginative, aesthetic and technical skills. It is a showcase of the ingenuity and talents. Arts enables us to preserve our good values, beliefs, practices and traditions. Arts as interpretation forms and redefines our national identity through meaning generation/interpretation. Through art interpretation our identity does not become stagnant; it becomes dynamic which enable us to adopt to changing realities. Arts as critique allows us to have a critical look at ourselves and examine the external factors (events, ideologies, movements) that influence our national identity allowing us to preserve our national identity at the same time enabling us to integrate into our identity the positive things from these external influences.

## References

Aguas, Jove Jim S. (2015). "Emerging Realities and Their Impact on Cultural Values and Identity" in *Annals of the University of Bucharest: Philosophy Series*, Number II, pp. 45-66.

Aguas, Jove Jim S. (2011). "Cultural Pluralism and Cultural Dialogue." *Overlapping Territories: Asian Voices on Culture and Civilization*. Edited by Bambang Sugiharto & Roy Voragen. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Famous Artists from the Philippines. Accessed from, <https://www.ranker.com/list/famous-artists-from-philippines/reference>. Accessed, March 30, 2018.

Tolstoy, Leo. (1896). "What is Art?" Accessed from, <http://gbelic.org/courses/representation-language/readings/tolstoy-whatisart.pdf>. Accessed, March 1, 2018.

UNESCO Mexico City "Declaration on Cultural Policies" *World Conference on Cultural Policies*. Mexico City, 26 July – 6 August 1982. Accessed from, [http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/files/12762/11295421661mexico\\_en.pdf/mexico\\_en.pdf](http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/files/12762/11295421661mexico_en.pdf/mexico_en.pdf). Accessed, October 17, 2017.

Who's Who: National Artists of the Philippines. Accessed from, <http://primer.com.ph/tips-guides/2016/07/27/whos-who-national-artists-of-the-philippines/>. March 30, 2018.