

Pliant like the Bamboo

by Ismael V. Mallari



"Bayanihan" by Joselito E. Barcelona

There is a story in Philippine folklore about a mango tree and a bamboo tree. Not being able to agree as to which was the stronger of the two, they called upon the wind to make the decision.

The wind blew hardest. The mango tree stood fast. It would not yield. It knew it was strong and sturdy. It would not sway. It was too proud. It was too sure of itself. But finally its root gave way, and it tumbled down.

The bamboo tree was wiser. It knew it was not as robust as the mango tree. And so every time the wind blew, it bent its head gracefully. It made loud protestations, but let the wind have its way. When finally the wind got tired of blowing, the bamboo tree still stood in all its beauty and grace.

The Filipino is like the bamboo tree. He knows that he is not strong enough, to withstand the onslaught of superior forces. And so he yields. He bends his head gracefully with many loud protestations.

And he has survived. The Spaniards came and dominated him for more than three hundred years. And, when the Spaniards left, the Filipinos still stood—only much richer in experience and culture.

The Americans took place of the Spaniards. They used more subtle means of winning over the Filipinos to their mode of living and thinking. The Filipinos embraced the American way of life more readily than the Spaniard's vague promises hereafter.

Then the Japanese came like a storm, like a plague of locusts, like a pestilence—rude, relentless, cruel. The Filipino learned to bow his head low, to “cooperate” with the Japanese in their “holy mission of establishing the Co-Prosperity Sphere.” The Filipino had only hate and contempt for the Japanese, but he learned to smile sweetly at them and to thank them graciously for their “benevolence and magnanimity”.

And now that the Americans have come back and driven away the Japanese, those Filipinos who profited most from cooperating with the Japanese have been loudest in their protestations of innocence. Everything is as if the Japanese had never been in the Philippines.

For the Filipino would welcome any kind of life that the gods would offer him. That is why he is contented and happy and at peace. The sad plight of other people of the world is not his. To him, as to that ancient Oriental poet, the past is already a dream, and tomorrow is only a vision; but today, well-lived, makes every yesterday a dream of happiness, and tomorrow is a vision of hope.

This may give you the idea that the Filipino is a philosopher. Well he is. He has not evolved a body of philosophical doctrines. Much less has he put them down into a book, like Kant for example, or Santayana or Confucius. But he does have a philosophical outlook on life.

He has a saying that life is like a wheel. Sometimes it is up, sometimes it is down. The monsoon season comes, and he has to go undercover. But then the sun comes out again. The flowers bloom, and the birds sing in the trees. You cut off the branches of a tree, and, while the marks of the bolo* are still upon it, it begins to shoot forth new branches—branches that are the promise of new color, new fragrance, and new life.

Everywhere about him is a lesson in patience and forbearance that he does not have to learn with difficulty. For the Filipino lives in a country on which the gods lavished their gifts aplenty. He does not have to worry about the morrow. Tomorrow will be only another day—no winter of discontent. Of he loses his possessions, there is the land and there is the sea, with all the riches that one can desire. There is plenty to spar—for friends, for neighbors and for everyone else.

No wonder that the Filipino can afford to laugh. For the Filipino is endowed with saving grace of humor. This humor is earthly as befits one who has not indulged in deep contemplation. But it has enabled the Filipino to shrug his shoulders in times of adversity and say to himself “*Bahala na*”*.

The Filipino has often been accused of being indolent and of lacking initiative. And he has answered back* that no one can help being indolent and lacking in initiative who lives under the torrid sun which saps the vitality.

This seeming lack of vitality is, however, only one of his means of survival. He does not allow the world to be too much with him. Like the bamboo tree, he lets the winds of chance and circumstance blow all about him; and he is unperturbed and serene.

The Filipino, in fact, has a way of escaping from the rigorous problems of life. Most of his art is escapist in nature. His forefathers wallowed in the *moro-moro, the awit, and the kurido. They loved to identify themselves as gallant knights battling for the favors of fair ladies or the possession of hallowed place. And now he himself loves to be lost in the throes and modern romance and adventure.

His gallantry towards women—especially comely women—is a manifestation of his romantic turn of mind. Consequently, in no other place in Orient are women so respected, so adulated, and so pampered. For his women have enabled the Filipinos to look upon the vicissitudes of fortune as the bamboo tree regards the angry blasts of the blustering wind.

The Filipino is eminently suited to his romantic role. He is slender and wiry. He is nimble and graceful in his movements, his voice is soft, and he has the gift of language. In what other place in the world can you find a people who can carry on a fluent conversation in at least *three languages?

This gift is another means by which the Filipino has managed to survive. There is no insurmountable barrier between him and any of the people who have come to live with him—Spanish, American, and Japanese. The foreigners do not have to learn his language. He easily manages to master theirs.

Verily, the Filipino is like the bamboo tree. In its grace, in its ability to adjust itself to the peculiar and inexplicable whims of fate, the bamboo tree is his expressive and symbolic national tree, it will have to be, not the molave or the narra, but the bamboo.

Footnotes:

*[bolo](#) - a Filipino sword, usually used in cutting bamboo and trees. During the Philippine-Spanish Revolution, Bolos are used by the [Katipuneros](#) to fight against the Spaniards.

*"Bahala na" - a Tagalog phrase which really means "Bathala na", (Bathala referring to god), which literally means "Just leave everything to God" or "God will provide"

*This phrase refers to [Dr. Jose Rizal's](#) defense on the colonial Spaniard's accuse of the indolence of the Filipinos. It was published in La Solidaridad in Madrid. His essay written in Spanish was in English entitled "Indolence of the Filipinos"

*moro-moro - a play famous during the Spanish occupation in the Philippines. Its theme always depicts the fight between a Christian and a Muslim who in the end, the Christian (being always depicted as the protagonist) wins the said fight.

*[awit](#) - a form of Filipino poetry very popular during the Spanish occupation in the Philippines. One best example is the "[Florante at Laura](#)" (Florante and Laura) by [Francisco Baltazar](#)

*kurido - a form of Filipino poetry very popular during the Spanish occupation in the Philippines. It comes from the word "corrido" in Spanish. One of the best known kurido is the story of "[Ibong Adarna](#)" (The Adarna Bird)

*three languages... - it refers to Spanish, English and Filipino languages. During the time that the author is writing this piece, it is notable that Filipinos are required to study these three languages.