

ETHICAL AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY IN THE IBALONG EPIC

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Introduction

Philosophy is generally linked to the nations of the West as progenitors and masters of the discipline. Western philosophical thoughts have invaded the world of ideas and overshadowed the equally brilliant and promising wisdom from the Asian or Eastern regions. Territorial and cultural expansionism and technology were the driving force and instrument in the spread of Western philosophy. Nonetheless, Asian philosophic thought has its native origin and intelligence, which until today, has remained unadulterated from the influence of external culture. The last statement just expressed may be too general, and there is a possibility that a philosophy called Asian may be actually Western thought in disguise. But this is what philosophy is all about – a quest for truth in a passion-free manner.

The prominent Asian thoughts are the Hindu and Chinese philosophies. Owing to being recognized as the earliest wisdom, and supposedly earlier than the Western thoughts, the Hindu and Chinese philosophies take the center stage in academic courses and public fora compared to the equally rich philosophies from other Asian countries like the Philippines. This is a challenge to Filipino scholars, and the gargantuan task of organizing the fragments of Filipino thoughts into a philosophic system is right now, in fact it has started. Timbreza¹ has blazed the trail towards a Filipino philosophy, and Gripaldo² has pursued the task of organizing the philosophical works of contemporary Filipino scholars.

The fact that the Filipino nation is multi-cultural with a colonized people, an inquisitive person cannot avoid asking the question: Is there a Filipino philosophy? Timbreza's remarks say it all: "Philosophy knows no race, it knows no culture, and knows no language as well ... knows no gender...and truth is truth for all." (2008:xxiv) Timbreza traced the roots of Filipino philosophy "in the various strands of the people's literature and oral tradition" (2008: xxi). This intellectual heritage takes various forms, and one of them is the epics. Written in verse or poetry, the Filipino epics shared the common stories of the adventures and exploits of folk heroes, endowed with superhuman abilities and powers against the monsters and other evil forces. To the undiscerning reader, the epic is a mere story of magic and enchantment intended for entertainment. Thus, the valuable messages and ideas in the epic are lost in the resplendent imageries of the stories. The fact remains that amidst such a splendor there are philosophical thoughts in epic stories. Disclosure becomes an imperative. Disclosure is a philosophical task of extricating the meaningful yet subdued thought or of intensifying the evident yet ignored idea.

To disclose the philosophical insights from Filipino epics, the researcher utilizes the Ibalong epic of the Bicol Region. The discussion proceed by (1) narrating the Ibalong epic, (2) extricating the ethical and political philosophy expressed therein, and (3) showing the implications of the Epic.

The Ibalong Epic³

Long before the Spaniards set foot on Philippine soil, the Filipinos already had their own culture. “They wrote folk epics which to date number no less than twenty” (Agoncillo 61). Early Spanish historians had all confirmed to the existence of these folk epics. However, the origin of the Ibalong epic remains sketchy. It is presumed that the Ibalong epic (philadsph.com) was jotted down in its complete Bicol narrative by Fray Bernardino de Melendreras, a Franciscan missionary in Guinobatan, Albay, from a minstrel referred to in the epic as Kadungung. Sometime in the middle or later part of the 1800s, the 60 stanzas of the epic was translated into Spanish by Melendreras which he included in a 400-page manuscript on the ancient custom of Albay. The 60 stanzas were included in the work of Fray Jose Castano in 1895, without him giving credit on the translation by Fray Melendreras. The facts that are clear at the moment are as follows: first, the source of the epic was the minstrel named Kadungung or the wandering bard described in the work of Fray Castano as “Homero de Ibalon”; second, the date the epic was recorded was sometime in mid-1800s; and third, no copy of the Bicol original is found and what is left is the text in Spanish. These historical facts must be noted for these may have implications on the ethical and political philosophies expressed in the Epic.

The narrator of the epic story was the minstrel Kadungung upon the request of Iling. The epic narrates the deeds of three heroes: Baltog, Handyong and Bantong. The first hero, Baltog, came from a foreign land named Botavara. He introduced agriculture in Ibalon, a beautiful land “*fairest in the world, that nature gives, the richest in what planting yields.*” Having single-handedly killed the fiercest and behemoth boar, Baltog was praised and honored as king by the local folks. The second hero, Handyong, came to Bicol with his warriors “*resolved to destroy their very stand, all monstrous creatures of the land.*” He triumphed over the seducer Oryol which “*so many times Handyong was fooled. That in pretending she was called Oryol, the great teacher of deceit.*” He introduced rich-yielding rice, upland farming and the needed farm implements like the plow, the harrow, bolo, hoe and the yoke for cows. During Handyong’s reign, inventions flourished like the loom and bobbins, earthen jar, pot, bowl and stove and utensils. They built houses observing city zone. He was the first to build a boat “*to Bicol River navigate on high.*” When the land was freed from the beasts of prey, Handyong established laws:

*Now that the land set free at last
With no more beasts of prey to kill,
He established better people laws
To serve his people interest and will.⁴*

In the 40-third stanza, Kadungung narrates:

*The laws and orders just made for all,
Upon their life and honor laid
He said equality to all the subjects
No distinction made both high and low.*

The next stanza reads:

*In what position to him endowed
The slave and master truly showed
Respect for rights of heritage
And of succession as bestowed.*

The last of the three heroes was Bantong⁵, “a faithful prince companion of battle-wary old Handyong.” Bantong is credited for killing Rabot, “a half-human and half-beast, magician, liar, that plagued the land.” Here, Kadungung ends his story and promised to continue on another day. This promise apparently failed to materialize for the recorded text of the epic ended with that promise.

Ethics in the Ibalong Epic

Asian philosophy is characterized as being expressive of the good, virtuous, and right living. Thus the various Asian literature would normally express ethical and religious meanings. In similar vein, “the Filipino thought is more of a philosophy of life than a philosophy of being” (Timbreza xvii). Furthermore, Timbreza (2008) said that Filipino thinking pertains more to human relationships and moral actions than to metaphysical speculations.

The ethical meanings that can be drawn from the Ibalong epic are the virtues of courage, and the moral action of fighting evil. Courage was exemplified by the three epic heroes in battling the monsters that roamed in the land called, Ibalon. For their acts of courage, the populace achieved peace and happiness. In Aristotelean ethics, courage is a virtue. It is a means between the excess which is rashness and the deficiency called cowardice. Courage as an ethical virtue must flow from rational judgment and the sincere motivation to overthrow injustice with justice. White (2003: 59) affirms that “the virtue of man also will be the state of character which makes a man good and which makes him do his own work well.” The epic heroes’ courageous acts were not meant for self-glorification, but insuring communal happiness. In Confucianism, the acts of Baltog, Handyong and Bantong conform to the innate laws of nature which is **Ren**. Ren when actualized, eventually becomes a virtue. Ren is human-heartedness and “can also be understood as love, benevolence and charity” (Babor 64), thus, become communal or social in its essential elements.

In Christian ethics, resistance to or fighting evil is a moral obligation. It is an implied “ought” in Christianity to do what is right and to avoid what is evil in a particular situation. Moral righteousness likewise finds expression in the Confucian thought called **Yi**. In Confucianism “doing what is *ought to be done* requires no compensation ... that one should do what is right for the sake of nothing”. (Babor 64) In the Ibalong epic, the heroes fought the forces of darkness and evil from the motive of moral duty. They believed that the destructive rule of the monsters must come to their end. The defeat of evil, depicted in the epic in terms of deceit, lie and destruction, was the objective. Public adulation was never in their minds. In Kant’s ethical view, the deeds of the epic heroes were for the sake of righteousness as a moral principle to be accomplished. In a world ruled by evil, reason and the moral law command people to walk the path of righteousness without regard to the consequences.

The Epic’s Political Ideas

The task of freeing the land from the beasts having been completed, subsequently, Handyong instituted laws that served the people’s interest and common good and general will. He believed that law and order was the foundation of life and honor. The preservation of the natural order and obedience to the law were integral elements in the promotion of human dignity and to a good life. In effect, Handyong became a one-man government which possessed an undisputed authority to make laws and govern. He achieved the status of a sovereign owing to his courage, superhuman ability and devotion to the common good. In Aristotle’s mind, Handyong’s “monarchial” rule typified the true form of government, for he ruled “for the sake of everyone’s moral and intellectual fulfillment”. (Stumpf and Fieser 97) Monarchy is a thing of the past. What modern politics can learn from the epic is the idea of good leadership and the pro-people type of governance.

Handyong’s leadership taught the political virtue of equality and restraint in uttering class distinctions. He acknowledged the existence of social classes in his land and divided people into slaves and masters by reason of inheritance and succession. But what held the classes together in pursuit of the common good and social order, were their respect for each other. Thus, Handyong’s concept of equality was respect and fair treatment of every member of the society regardless of social status. Although separated by time, there’s a shared view of equality between Handyong and John Rawls. In his theory of justice, Rawls started with the idea of a group of people deciding on the principles upon which their political association would run. To achieve social justice, people “should forget everything about themselves as individuals. They do not know if they are poor or wealthy, men or women. They do not know their race or their position within society. They come together simply as individuals, nothing more.” (Thompson 160) Likewise, Handyong’s political idea was related to Confucius’ ethical view of Ren, which is social in nature and not egoistic.

The political virtues expressed in the Ibalong epic are beyond reproach since these are grounded on solid ethical foundations. However, viewed the epic with nationalistic fervor, we can draw ignoble political realities. First, the three heroes who eventually became the rulers of Ibalon were foreigners. Baltog came from Botavara, Handyong arrived in Bicol with his band of warriors, and Bantong was Handyong's faithful companion. Before their arrival, Ibalon or Bicol was inhabited by people who besieged by monstrous beasts they were intimidated, subdued and helpless. The three warriors came as liberators, developers and colonizers of the land. The local folks, unable to achieve self freedom and progressive development on own, became a willing colonized people. To maintain control, Handyong built his power on the people's virtue of respect for rights of heritage and of succession. Implicitly, it brought into the consciousness of the natives a debt of gratitude to the foreign liberators.

Implications of the Epic

By now, the Ibalong epic emerges not just a mere story but conveys a message to contemporary Filipino society. The following implications can be drawn from the epic.

First, Filipino philosophy is embodied in their literature. Literature, both written and unwritten, reflects the Filipino's philosophical perceptions, values, convictions and beliefs (Timbreza xxi). Like other Asian philosophies, the Filipino philosophy "also carries the marks of moral philosophy" (Babor 57). But unlike the dominant Asian philosophies, the Filipino literature of the past extends to the discussions of political ideals.

Second, the country is rich in folk epics. This type of literature is a source of ethical and political philosophy of Filipino forbears. The development of our ethical and political beliefs can be traced to the past through the epics and similar literatures. Timbreza (xxi) argued that Filipino literature bears the stamp of the past and is the life of the past in the present.

The third implication is a caution. The Filipino literature may signify the impeccable ethical and political virtues, yet there could be utterances, textual or oral, that may subdue the spirit of the people as a nation. This caution requires that the readers should be open-minded yet grounded well in their minds and hearts as Filipinos. History has demonstrated to this day that literature can be used as an instrument for domination and colonization.

Fourth, folk epics are good materials in the teaching of ethics and political philosophy. Filipino students can relate to their own literary heritage than the foreign literatures. Filipino literature, such as the epics, is the language of our philosophical thoughts.

Finally, in a paper on Chinese myths, Garcia (2006:45) noted Rosenstand's comments on the lack of research on the connection between myth and ethics. Similarly,

there is a dearth of studies on folk epic as a source of the philosophical thoughts of the Filipinos. There is the hope that we can unify the Filipino thoughts into a unified philosophical system.

Notes

1. Dr. Florentino T. Timbreza was acknowledged as “The Father of Filipino Philosophy”.
2. Dr. Rolando M. Gripaldo is a respected Filipino philosopher.
3. The readings of the Ibalong epic were derived from two sources: (1) Ibalong: Ang Epikong Bikolnong by Joan B. Encinares, and (2) Epic of Ibalong from the website www.philadsph.com/trisasyon/Epic.htm.
4. I have quoted some parts of the Ibalong epic for emphasis and clarity of my discussions.
5. Some texts use the name Bantong, while others use the name Mantong, but they refer to the same epic hero of Ibalon.

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