

Creativity

The Mindanawon creative spirit soars

If I had to change careers, I would become a talent scout-*cum*-agent.

All my life I have been surrounded by and interacted with hundreds of the most creative and talented peoples this part of the world-many of them Mindanawons.

Indeed, it has been my great privilege to have known them as friends. I have enjoyed their cultural outputs, affirmed the beauty and integrity of their gifts, encouraged them to continue nurturing their talents, and, in the case of a few, discovered and helped hone their gifts before they themselves did.

Early on in my childhood, living in what is now Digos City, I realized that I was surrounded by artists. At the time I did not yet have the heightened appreciation for “folk-artists” as we have now, but I remember gazing transfixed at the sights and colors that abounded in my small hometown.

Walking past our homes on their way to sell their produce in the market Bagobos would proudly wear their clothes and jewelry. (This scene probably ingrained in me a deep fascination and appreciation for the Lumad and their cultures.) So also did the Joloanons who lived in the neighborhood.

And then there were the rituals in the cultural life of a small town dominated by Christian lowland peasants. As children we enjoyed outburst of raw talent as town fiestas, Easter, Christmas, and New Year’s day were celebrated. There were the usual folk dances, songs, and comedy drama; pageant’s around Jesus’s Passion and Resurrection; blessing of palm fronds; and processions where statues provided powerful theatrical images.

The highlight of course was the construction of the *hubkas*, the elaborate structure used for the *sugat* at the Easter dawn ceremony. Under a canopy, a young girl dressed as an angel descends to remove Mary’s black veil while hauntingly singing the Alleluia, before the meeting of Mary and the Risen Christ is reenacted. Our thrill at seeing the ceiling open up as in a flower through which this beautiful angel appears was a rite of passage in itself.

At Christmas, the variety of *parol* designs dazzled the eyes even if those days only the very rich could buy lights; the rest of us used candles. We also listened to folk *daygon* (carols) that detailed the Christmas story in verse sung by children and choreographed with folk dance steps.

Looking back, I felt that culture was alive; it gave color to our lives; and made our holidays more vibrant, interesting, and enjoyable.

It was, however, when I became actively involved in the nascent Mindanawon theatre movement that arose in the late 1960s when I directly became in touch with the rich pool of talents around me. From Digos to Tagum, from Mati to Davao and to other parts of Mindanao, I encountered ordinary people with extraordinary gifts: men, women, and children-be they peasants, urban poor, students, labor leaders, church workers-could sing, act, write music and songs, play instruments, design the stage and props, improvise costumes from indigenous materials (the aesthetics of poverty was in vogue), and write, direct, and put up cultural productions.

Having written and directed a few plays involving a number of theatre groups, I was right at the center of this cultural movement.

Early colleagues in this movement were Dong Galenzoga, Nestor Horfilla, Lando Arban, Fe Remotigue, Norma Javellana, Inday Yap, and Malou Tiangco from whom I learned a lot. Interacting with artists from the Philippine Educational Theatre Association was also empowering.

This movement would later expand to the Mindulani network in the 1980s and 1990s. Through this network, I had the distinct privilege of interacting with the most talented and driven Mindanawon theatre artists including those of Kaliwat Theatre Collective (who later on made me an honorary member), the Kambayoka, IPAG, KAFI, EDCADs and the like.

Since the theatre movement provided the venue for the exploration of dance, song-writing, singing and playing of indigenous musical instruments, eventually I found myself meeting and interacting with those who would eventually make a name for themselves in the various disciplines. They included members of Asin (who stayed in our house in Ma-a for a few months while touring southern Mindanao); the Bagong Lumad (Joey Ayala, Popong Landero, Bayang Barrios at al.) and the Kaliwat (Marili Fernandez, Jeejay Arriola, Eden Espejo, Richard Belar, Titing Tranquite et al.). In the area of liturgical songs, there was Nars Fernandez who remains the undisputed queen of such songs.

Parallel to the excitement and ensuing prolific output in this circle was the arena of the writers. Early on, I rubbed elbows with those who were already recognized writers in the early years-Inday Santiago, Roger Antalan, Fred Salanga, Marilen Abesamis et al. then came the gutsy ones in the fields of print and investigative journalism-Rommel Hipolito, Gus Miclat, Ma. Carolyn Arguillas, Nikki Gomez, the late Edith Eco, Melot Balisalisa, Billy dela Rosa, and the other AFRIM fellow.

There were also those who were engaged in the realm of literature, mainly Don Pagusara and Mac Tiu. With the alternative mosquito press providing opportunities-despite-enormous constrains including the threat of arrest and imprisonment-progressive poets and journalists held hands to get texts produced.

Photography also made headway; Bishop Benny Tuftud, Ed Gerlock and Neil Frazer were the trailblazer. Their black-and-white photos of peasant profiles, Lumad faces, landscape studies and human interest compositions continue to haunt Mindanawons who are passionate about peace and development issues of their homeland.

Painting, art improvisations and stage designs also exploded through the years of the Marcos regime. There was Itok (Nonoy Rodriguez) with his simple line drawings, political cartoons and watercolors. There were the Mindulani stage designers. Then came Al Manrique, Bert Monterona, Abe Garcia, Anoy Catague, Carlota Pio et al. Today one sees their masterpieces hanging in art galleries, museums and at the Matina Town Square.

Through all these years, I've had the good fortune of knowing them all. I have even benefited personally as in times when we needed to mount productions in our missions or family events like my mother's funeral, my 50th birthday celebration and the like.

For me one of the most significant facets of the God I believe in is that of God as Creator. Precisely because God has created so much beauty for our eyes to see and our souls to embrace, we need to be in constant communion with the sources of creativity in our world, society, and community. For me, the ones who are most able to manifest the

presence of the divine are the artists, who can create so much beauty despite the limitations and pressures that confront them.

Having walked the paths across our island with people of bound-less creativity, I feel so privileged. having interacted with artists who have so generously offered their gifts-especially toward a collective dream of a Mindanao where justice and peace would reign; where the integrity of creation is kept intact; where Muslims, Lumad and Kristiano can coexist in harmony-I feel blessed.

Bulat-ag Farm
Nati, Kulaman, Sultan Kudarat
24 January 2003