

NCCA'S SAMBAYANAN 2000 (People's Culture as Fashion and Deception)

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PART I

On paper, SAMBAYANAN 2000, a project of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA), promised to be a realization of the various proposals and resolutions made by the country's artists and cultural and development workers gathered for the conference on Culture and the Arts for Philippines 2000 (CAP 2000). The conference was spearheaded by the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) in 1994 under the leadership of then CCP Artistic Director, Ms. Deanna Ongpin Recto, now First Secretary at UNESCO in Paris, France.

The slogan "SAMBAYANAN 2000" is catchy. It suggests the idea of culture and the arts of the people, for the people, by the people. It makes us believe that government, through its cultural agencies like the NCCA, is now serious in creating a people's culture and arts, as these are important components of any genuine social development program. Thus, through glossy posters and brochures, the NCCA presented a festival of culture and the arts for the whole country: a package of art exhibits, theater performances, and even regional conferences on cultural policies reportedly prepared and facilitated by artists and cultural and development workers in collaboration with different local government units in the regions.

SAMBAYANAN 2000 likewise promised to be a decentralized program for a people's culture and arts as it sought to involve various regions through a tour of art exhibits, cultural performances, and conferences packaged by the NCCA.

The slogan “SAMBAYANAN 2000” immediately recalls activists’ slogans of the 1970s: “Bring culture and the arts to the masses! Build a people’s culture!”

It seems, therefore, that with SAMBAYANAN 2000, the Philippines is now on the right track towards becoming a culture-art conscious polity. We now have a government declaring its full commitment to a people’s culture, arts, and social development and even a private sector ready to assist through an abundance of funds already in the pipeline.

SAMBAYANAN 2000 would make us believe that culture and the arts, like environmentalism, is now an “in” thing. It is fashionable to talk about culture and the arts as it is no longer a marginalized discourse of long-haired deviants and social malcontents. It has been transformed into a discourse used by politicians, entrepreneurs, self-serving artists, and cultural workers.

Our politicians and their collaborators—entrepreneurs and artists (especially during this election season and even artists’ award season)—fear that they will lose credibility as moral leaders what with the loss of confidence in the Estrada leadership now under trial for gross incompetence, theft, constitutional violations, and betrayal of public trust. They are now deliberately restructuring power relations to re-establish consent from the people themselves. Therefore, mechanisms are being deployed to displace the root of dissent and provide new avenues for reasserting moral leadership. In fact, oppositions or antagonisms are interpreted as “differences.” It will not be surprising if the NCCA, through its allegedly pro-people director Virgilio Almario, claims that SAMBAYANAN 2000 “differs in approach” in relation to the CCP’s CAP 2000, which Ms. Deanna Ongpin Recto organized.

A careful and critical reading of NCCA’s propaganda about SAMBAYANAN 2000 would make us realize that this alleged pro-people and pro-development program for a nation’s culture and arts expectedly evades the terrain of more critical cultural criticisms and a genuinely pro-people development discourse while it appropriates concepts, which if allowed to naturally develop, could destroy the structures presently supporting politicians, entrepreneurs, and their artist-collaborators. Thus, even as the various regions and their

constituents, through their local government units, are purportedly involved in SAMBAYANAN 2000, these same regional units will be used to revive or reinvent the credibility and legitimacy of politicians, entrepreneurs, artists, and cultural workers who have actually either become inefficient, irrelevant, or suspect. This same strategy is evident in SAMBAYANAN 2000 posters and brochures invoking “people’s empowerment through decentralization” of culture—an act which could undermine people power and autonomy of people’s initiatives by arresting genuine forms of criticisms against existing power relations which have long deprived the farmers, fisherfolks, market vendors, and transport workers of their rights to culture and the arts.

It is along this line that SAMBAYANAN 2000 coopts the concept of a genuine people’s culture and arts. As a concept that should challenge elitism and decadence in Filipino culture and arts, “people’s culture” is actually a threat to the privileged position of the few in our social and cultural life. Its appearance, therefore, through the NCCA’s SAMBAYANAN 2000, is an attempt to re-fashion a people’s culture and creativity without problematizing the structural malaise that has long deprived millions and generations of Filipinos of their rights to culture and the arts.

PART II

The politics of SAMBAYANAN 2000 has been diluted with its cooptation by conservative, pro-establishment artists, and cultural and development workers who want to maintain their turfs. In Leyte, for example, the NCCA’s SAMBAYANAN 2000 was made accessible through the Leyte Art Foundation (LEAF), which is composed of artists and cultural workers whose views of art and culture are conservative, dubious, and pro-establishment. They believe that art is for the specially-gifted, that art is private property, and that no one can enter it without the necessary “protocol.” These artists comprising LEAF are tasked to promote SAMBAYANAN 2000, which claims to be a more democratic cultural project as it purportedly brings to the regions a people’s culture and arts.

It is, therefore, of prime importance that meaningful effort be exerted to recapture the more liberating and genuinely pro-people spirit of a “people’s culture and arts,” especially in the context of a

colonized, patriarchal, and parochial region like the Eastern Visayas. The politics of cultural criticism and opposition against SAMBAYANAN 2000 will entail a difficult but necessary process of confrontation, if only to highlight the deep-seated conflicts residing in the fabric of practices, things silenced by romantic discourses about the “nation, the people, their culture.” It must be stressed that to force unity, nationhood, and empowerment in the face of unequal relations between classes, genders, and regions simply leads to the maintenance of inequality in this hierarchical society.

Programs for a people’s culture and the arts must not be relinquished to sectors which control access to privileged turf in the name of cultural and artistic management. People from the broader base of the region—the battered women, harassed students, toiling mat weavers, poor *maniriday*, dancers in the rural areas—should lead in shaping, protecting, and upholding what must be a people’s culture and arts!

The role of outsiders will be important too. There is a need for a more people-oriented academic intelligentsia to facilitate a democratic process in the promotion of culture and the arts. The said intelligentsia can undertake parallel activities inside different institutions of learning, in teaching and research, in whatever way knowledge about people, culture, and the arts is constituted and produced. The same should be expected of genuinely pro-people politicians and policy-makers. The latter, especially, must continuously reflect on their privileged positions—their class, gender, and cultural/regional locations. These positions must be used not as springboards for collaboration but as tactical positions to subvert and undermine policies that contain democratic expression, as a place to enable and empower the real bearers of a people’s culture and arts.

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