

# OPINION & FEATURES

## Mother-unfriendly

**P**HILIPPINE society is supposed to be matriarchal and the country, for the second time, is led by a woman. Yet the Philippines fared badly in an annual international survey on the state of mothers.

Now in its 10th year, the State of the World's Mothers 2009 Report ranked the Philippines 42nd among 75 less developed countries, four notches lower than its rank last year. The report, prepared by the US-based Save the Children Inc., classified 154 countries into three development tiers, with the Philippines falling into the middle tier together with most other Asian nations. In this tier the Philippines ranked behind Thailand, which placed 11th, China (14th), Vietnam (23rd), Mongolia (29th) and Malaysia (36th).

The Mothers' Index was based on women's health, educational, economic and political status as well as children's well-

being. In the first tier of "more developed" countries, Sweden, Norway and Australia were ranked as the most mother-friendly countries in the world. In Tier 2, which included the Philippines, the best places were Cuba, Israel and Argentina. The Maldives, Cape Verde and Uganda topped the list in the last tier.

Sen. Pia Cayetano, who chairs the Senate committee on social justice, said the country would be unable to meet the Millennium Development Goals particularly in the reduction of maternal mortality and deaths of children under five years old. She said

an average of 10 to 11 mothers die daily in the country from childbirth complications.

The country's ranking in the Mothers' Index was weighed down by the fact that in 2007, skilled health personnel were present at only 60 percent of childbirths.

In the same year, 28 out of every 1,000 Filipino children did not live until their fifth birthday, 28 percent of children under five were moderately or severely underweight, and only 33 percent of women used contraceptives. Those were sobering figures as Filipinos paid tribute to their mothers on their special day last Sunday. (Philstar.com)

### GUEST EDITORIAL



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## What is the street value of being human?

**T**HE current dispute between the book industry and the Department of Finance regarding the imposition of taxes on book importation boils down to this.

The book industry—publishers, booksellers, authors, distributors—represented by the Book Development Association of the Philippines says that, according to the law, book imports are not to be taxed. They cite Republic Act 8047 and the 1952 Florence Agreement to back up their position.

The Department of Finance says that according to the law, book imports are to be taxed. They cite R.A. 8047, which interestingly enough was authored by the current Finance Secretary, and the 1952 Florence Agreement to back up their position.

In short, it is all a matter of interpretation. The absence of a comma can alter the meaning of the text; a phrase like "the tax and duty-free importation of books or raw materials to be used in book publishing" can mean entirely different things to the people who produce books and the people who try to quantify the value of books.

There also seems to be some confusion over whether the words "publishing" and "printing" are interchangeable. "Publishing," according to Webster's Dictionary, is "the business or profession of the commercial production and issuance of literature, information, musical scores or sometimes recordings, or art." Printing is "the act of making copies by impressing paper against an inked printing surface." Publishing is the industry; printing is the technology invented by Johannes Gutenberg in 1454, although historians declare that moveable type—the materials used to impress the words on paper—was invented in China by Pi Sheng in 1041.

Nations have routinely gone to war over the interpretation of religious texts. Ironically for the book industry, which is in the business of disseminating words, words are being employed against them. The word "Orwellian" has been brandished by the anti-taxation side; this should make old George very happy. Some of the arguments are reminiscent of Bill Clinton's evasions during the Monica Lewinsky affair: "Depends on what you mean by 'the'."

For years the Philippines has enjoyed some of the lowest book prices anywhere. This is because book imports are not taxed. In the case of the big bookstores, the bookseller's discount is passed on to the buyers. You can get the mass-market paperback ("pocketbook") of, say, *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo* at P315, even if the cover price is US\$7.99 (about P375). Even at Fully Booked, where the merchandise is more expensive, the trade paperback of James *L a s t* listed at ( a b o u t the cover P499.

### EMOTIONAL WEATHER REPORT

Jessica Zafrá

I was impressed a Republic Act from the Marcos era was responsible for the duty-free status of books. It has not been mentioned in the materials I've read, but perhaps I haven't been paying close enough attention. Legalese is more tedious reading than tech manuals written in a remote Asian sweatshop.

The relatively low prices of books here have unfortunately not led to widespread book-reading. The costs are still too high for the average Filipino wage earner who must prioritize food and shelter.

Occasionally a book like *Twilight*, the *Harry Potter* series, or the Dan Brown potboilers become big hits, and these keep the book industry going. (The number one bestselling author on earth, I read somewhere, is James Patterson. He is not to be confused with James Hamilton Paterson, who's written wonderful books about the Philippines including *Playing With Water*, *Seven-Tenths* and *America's Boy*.) Now that the Finance Department has declared that it's all been a mistake, books should've been taxed all along, expect books to become more expensive and even further beyond the reach of the average citizen.

"*Hindi naman nagbabasa ang mga yan*" is the snobbish view;



Philstar.com Photo

it may be true, but it doesn't make it less sad.

We can also expect new books to take longer to arrive on store shelves. They will have to sit in warehouses while Customs officials decide how much educational/cultural value they possess, and level the corresponding taxes. In my understanding, the less textbook-ish a book is, the higher the tax. The task of quantifying the educational/cultural value of book imports is assigned to the Customs examiners. I hope they took lots of Comparative Literature classes; being the arbiters of culture is a heavy burden to bear.

What's tragic is that in our country, decisions are always based on expediency. We need more money, so we tax books; we cannot afford culture; we cannot allow ourselves to think for the long term. Thus we are reduced to quantifying everything, including the unquantifiable.

Books are the repository of human experience. They tell us what being human is all about. How much is that in pesos?

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E-mail your comments and questions to [emotionalweatherreport@gmail.com](mailto:emotionalweatherreport@gmail.com). (Philstar.com)

## Footnote to a false note



**THERES THE RUB**  
Conrado de Quiros

I beg to disagree with some friends on this. "This" is the way Martin Nievera sang *Lupang Hinirang* in the Pacquiao-Hatton fight, which has brought him into a brawl with preservers of Filipino tradition. The fight has so far been lopsided, with many authority figures, from congressmen to historians, knocking him down with a chorus of irate voices.

I myself have no problems with it. In fact I have a couple of reasons for liking it.

The first has to do with the barb that Nievera went the route of show biz by aping the American singers (mostly black) who make the *Star-Spangled Banner* sound like Motown each time an American boxer takes to the ring. Which, as the nastier remarks go, is probably because Nievera is an American at heart and on paper. I leave others to argue where Nievera's loyalties lie, though given all the open and closet "statehooders" here—Filipinos who long for the country to become a state of the United States—not least among the congressmen, I wouldn't advise pressing this point too loudly.

But even if Nievera went show biz, what of it? Boxing is pretty much show biz, of the loud and glittery type. And though Nievera did not sing *Lupang Hinirang* traditionally, he did not disrespect it either, to use a word much favored by African-Americans.

The reason Americans do not mind their National Anthem sung like gospel (or its modern reincarnations; I wouldn't be surprised if it becomes hip-hop one day) is that they are secure in their patriotism. They are secure in their sense of country. They are secure in their loyalty to flag and country. Enough to withstand Jimi Hendrix's "sacrilegious" interpretation of the *Star-Spangled Banner*, which he did in Woodstock, his awesome guitar blaring out

the din of discord in protest against the Vietnam War. That version has since been elevated to iconic status by baby boomers.

Our prissiness with orthodoxy is in fact a symptom of an affliction as worrisome as swine flu. We like revering tradition because we prefer form over content, because we like showing our love of country in ritual rather than in practice. We like to build busts and monuments to the heroes without liking to follow their ideals and actions, which is really the best tribute to them. The religious equivalent of this is that we like to hear Mass and receive the sacraments without liking to live lives that are not given to lying, cheating, stealing and murdering.

It's like that line in *Lupang Hinirang*: "*Ang mamatay nang dahil say iyo*" ("to die for you"). I've always said that was a perfect, if ironic, commentary on us. We've never had problems dying for country, we've always had problems living for it. I've always suggested—utter sacrilege!—changing it to, "*Ang mabuhay ng dahil sa iyo*" ("to live for you").

My second point is: Why on earth should we regard tradition as intractable or unchangeable?

Even the Rock, or the Church, changes. I still remember the time when the Mass, which used to unfold with Latin incantations, gave way to idiomatic English. Or indeed, horror of horrors, when the Gregorian chant gave way to the "Guitar Mass." Once things that threatened to make the faithful faithless, plain language and (middle-of-the-road) pop (if not rock) are rock-solid orthodoxy in Masses now.

In the case of historical tradition, I should think changes should not just be acceptable to us, they should be welcome to us. I say this because our lack of sense of history—truly notorious in that we can't even remember the recent past—owes in great part to our tendency to embalm history. To treat it as something dead and gone and remembered only on the historical equivalents of All Saints' Day. One natural consequence of this is to turn history into

sacred text and the heroes into untouchable objects of worship.

I still remember how we used to look at Jose Rizal, Andres Bonifacio, Apolinario Mabini and the other heroes that way, courtesy of high school and college. Something the new wave of historians led by Renato Constantino corrected, turning them into ordinary folk who did extraordinary things in their time and place. No less, or more, than the activists did in their time and place. The process of demystification, or "humanization," would culminate in historians like Ambeth Ocampo who would make Rizal et al. as contemporary as, well, Nievera's rendition of the National Anthem.

Which makes me wonder why Ambeth in particular should disapprove of that rendition. I recall that when he was pilloried by purists for "watering down" history with his "pop" version of it, I wrote a column saying that far from detracting from the worth of history, he added to it. Specifically by making the past present, by making the dead living, by making history not history in the idiomatic sense of "we're outta here" but history in the sense of current events. The power of history lies precisely in its being living history, or a "continuing past," as Constantino put it. One would imagine that a continuing past uses the idioms or idiosyncrasies of the flowing present. That's what makes the past worth remembering. That's what makes the past worth living.

It's not just that I don't think Nievera has done any harm by his version, it is that I think he has done much good with it. Anything that hooks the youth in particular of this amnesiac country to their past, even if it feels like a right hook to those who take that past reverentially, is fine by me. History has been known to rock, history has been known to roll. Sometimes, history has even been known to OPM.

In any case, I have a lot of friends who've always thought the National Anthem wasn't *Lupang Hinirang* but Juan de la Cruz's *Ang Himig Natin*. (Inquirer.net)



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