

The Empire Speaks Back

WHETHER it is on the Internet or satellite television, English is suddenly everywhere and the language is emerging as the lingua franca of the post-modern age.

From Korea down to Malaysia, Kuwait to Vanuatu, the Asia-Pacific is rediscovering the English language and brushing up on a vital tool for getting ahead in the cut-throat race for global competitiveness.

Earlier this century, the English language was viewed warily by newly-independent former British and US colonies, and by closed societies in the region keen on shutting out 'cultural pollution.'

Today English is the language of choice even for Cambodians and many Vietnamese who have little desire to relearn French. Schools teaching English in China are doing booming business, and Indochinese diplomats are getting crash courses in the language.

Across Asia, English is shedding its colonial hue and being imbued, filtered and shaped to local cultures — changing from a tool of colonialism to a pragmatic instrument of economic competition.

"Many have appropriated the language of the masters in order to be free citizens," observed English professor Vivencio Jose of the University of the Philippines, during the country's first conference on English studies in June. "English is now indeed a weapon to acquire and use, a technology resource of knowledge and information."

After all, English's ability to bridge language barriers has made it a near-global tongue, used by some 700 million speakers, bulk of the world's mail, and 80 per cent of electronic information.

Indeed, English is a must for surfing the Internet and accessing data on the information superhighway, while English-language programmes are beamed through cable television through Asia.

At the same time, many scientific and technical terms in English are hard or impossible to translate into local languages.

Even the Malaysian government, which has been pushing Bahasa Malaysia for the past two decades, appears to be reconsidering its position.

More and more schools in Malaysia are using English as the language of instruction while Kuala Lumpur itself is

Once viewed as just another hateful reminder of Asia's colonial past, English is staging a comeback in the region. Johanna Son of Inter Press Service reports.



Inter Press Service

urging Malaysians to improve their English to boost international economic links.

In July, Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim said the country is secure in its national language. "But globalisation and Malaysia's active role in international relations should encourage us to enhance our command of English," he said.

The Philippines, which believes it has a "competitive historical advantage" in English after being occupied by the United States, the government recently launched an 'English for Global Competitiveness' campaign.

And while the Indonesians made it their mission to change English names of buildings and billboards in time for their country's 50th independence anniversary in August, officials of the former Dutch colony are very much aware that English is the lingua franca of international business and politics.

Still, renewed interest in English is causing concern among some Asian intellectuals and linguists who fear local languages built up painstakingly in post-independence years may suffer.

Native Malay-based languages in Indonesia and Malaysia were a pillar of the countries' efforts toward na-

tional identity. The late Indonesian president Sukarno had begun the aggressive push for Bahasa Indonesia, and Kuala Lumpur soon followed suit, launching a Bahasa Malaysia drive in 1971.

Some analysts point out that while knowledge of English is a major edge, it is a fallacy to equate it with national progress. They note that Japan, Korea and Thailand boomed despite the fact that English spoken less widely there than in other countries.

A number of scholars say it is not a choice between English and Asia's national languages, but how people use both.

Filipino academic Prescelina Legasto says English can be the language of communication among developing countries still unable to talk to one another in their national tongues. Indeed, English is used by the seven members of the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN) at the grouping's meetings.

But Legasto adds: "English does not have to be the 'open sesame' for Third World countries now being limited by the international division of labour to the export of English-speaking cheap labour or to the consumption of Western culture globally

beamed via satellite or transmitted through cyberspace."

Interestingly, though, she says Asians can use the once-colonial language to address this very problem. A growing number of South-east Asian creative writers churn out work in English. Legasto quips, "The Empire can write back."

Jose apparently agrees, saying many advocates of the Filipino national language, the official medium of teaching in the Philippines, in fact argued their positions in English.

Many former English language-oriented colonies have also asserted their right to speak and write in English according to local culture, leading to local variants or hybrids of the language as spoken in the Philippines or Singapore, whose style has been dubbed 'Singlish'.

Some analysts say talk of English as a competitive tool may be focusing too much on its economic facet.

"A second language like English is perfect for commercial and global competitiveness," acknowledges Jesuit priest and English teacher Alfeo Nudas, adding that an English-speaking Filipino can more easily land an overseas job than one who does not speak the language.

"But only the uniqueness of Filipino can catch or articulate the rhythms and reasons of our originally, identity and uniqueness as people," he observes. "Language, besides its commercial level, has a soul level."

Even then, Asian countries that are brushing up on English are now worried about the declining standards of the language.

Malaysia is updating textbooks and revising examinations to raise English standards. The University of the Philippines launched a project to improve English speaking and teaching, and a Centre for the English Language is scheduled to be set up in the Philippines soon.

Newly-affluent South Korea is also overhauling its English instruction system, realising that years of studying the language "through eyes rather than ears" leave many unable to speak it fluently.

Said a South Korean delegate at the meeting here on English: "Although we are wary of foreign language acquisition as one way of cultural colonisation, we believe that English is still a good catalyst and useful vehicle for communication."

The Many Moods of Marriages

asian diary BY ARJUNA



RUDYARD Kipling in his famous poem urges mankind to accept triumph and disaster with the same face, to treat joys and sorrows with equal intensity or acceptance. But this is not always possible. We are overwhelmed by one or the other.

A joy in the world is a marriage or wedding. Though customs differ from country to country and according to religion, a wedding anywhere is a mix of religious rites and feasting.

In Manila or Colombo, one sees brides travelling in gaily decorated limousines. In Colombo, on some days, several such limousines whiz past you and then you realize it is an auspicious day and weddings are taking place all over the city! On these auspicious days photo studios are filled with bridal couples and their retinues waiting to be photographed. It is a joy to behold this sight.

In Buddhist and Hindu weddings, everything is done at so-called auspicious times.

The bridal couple enters the hall and leaves it at the "auspicious" moments fixed by the astrologer.

In many of these weddings, the exact date of the nuptials is kept secret lest enemies try to create trouble at that time. Even the invitation cards sent to invitees do not contain the exact time! Mum's the word on this subject.

In Hindu weddings, it is observed the bride and groom do not leave the reception till all the guests have departed.

In Buddhist weddings, as the bridal couple stand on the "poruwa" or platform specially set up, beves of little girls chant festive stanzas.

In Muslim weddings, it is noted the bride's brother

brings the groom into the hall under mock force to wed his sister.

In Christian weddings today, it is first to the Church and then to the hotel or home for the wedding feast. A thread of joy runs through the world at this event.

In contrast, funerals cast a gloom. Here two customs vary from country to country and religion to religion.

One major difference between Hindus and Muslims in India is that Hindus cremate their dead while Muslims bury theirs. It is a thorny issue in India. But gloom on such occasions is common to both.

Thus in this world of distinct joys and sorrows, we came across a strange young man from the tiny village of Delgolla in Northwestern Sri

Lanka who was reported to have celebrated his wedding while the dead body of his father was in his home!

The father had died on August 9 and his funeral was scheduled for August 13 while the young man's wedding had been earlier fixed for August 11.

The young man had been allegedly forced by the bride's family to have the wedding as scheduled. So he had complied.

The wedding was celebrated on August 11 and the funeral took place on August 13.

This was a strange phenomenon but the young man from Delgolla certainly lived up to Rudyard Kipling's poem —

If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster And treat those two impostors — Just the same!

Joys and sorrows are both impostors! — Depthnews Asia

The Politics of Silence : Seamus Heaney's Poetry

Continued from page 9 into the unspoken. But amidst all these verbal inarticulations is Heaney's imagery of violence which "unplugs a political undercurrent in his poetry." Often smiles become charged with violence: "Between my finger and my thumb

The skat pen rests, snug as a gun. ('Digging')

The language is explosive and underneath the seemingly quiet exterior it maps the political violence of contemporary Belfast. That he muffles his politics behind the cover of nature poetry indicates Heaney's sense of the difficulty of openly expressing the complexity of the Ulster problem as well as his awareness of the danger in such an expression.

In fact, Heaney's linguistic indirectness itself often gives him away. He often caricatures the Protestants and shows them as vile and despicable in comparison with the Catholics. In 'Dock', Heaney shows how silence and violence combine in the Protestant dock: "that fist would drop a hammer on a Catholic — / Oh yes, that kind of thing could start again."

The potential violence of the dock is eloquent in spite of his verbal silence. Heaney keeps his characters mute while he lets his imagery to be expressive of the hidden tension, violence and fear of the life in Northern Ireland. The politics of silence is thus double-edged: it cuts both ways as it speaks for the reticence of the Ulster Catholics as well as for the tongue of violence that is so vociferous in the political atmosphere of a battle-ridden Belfast.

In Northern Ireland, language itself becomes a potential political force. The Irish dialect identifies and segregates the Irish from their subjugators. Winterring Out (1972) depicts this linguistic difference to be the core of the sectarian difference. "Politics, therefore, becomes a matter of language. Historically British possession of Ireland was linguistic as well as territorial and for Heaney language embodies the land. Thus, by making language the subject of much of the poetry in Winterring Out, Heaney implicitly makes politics the subject too."

Language becomes a tool for subjugation in the hands of the Protestants, and the Catholics have to fall back on their silence as a means of self-preservation, a taciturn opposition to the overwhelming majority. Heaney points out in an interview that "etymology, vocabulary, even intonations ... are all active signals of loyalties, Irish or British, Catholic or Protestant."

The events of 1968-69 in Northern Ireland marked a watershed for Heaney's political consciousness. In October, 1968, in Heaney's native Derry, there were serious clashes between the civil rights campaigners and the Royal Ulster Constabulary. A wave of riots that started by the end of 1969 occasioned the calling of British troops and the formation of the provisional wing of the IRA. The events of this period changed Heaney's notion of the functions of poetry: "From that moment the problems of poetry moved from being simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament." Winterring Out bears the stamp of this new realization but only shadowily

through dream-images and nightmares. "What Winterring Out does is to explore the deeper structures of present hostilities, the way in which the divisions of the Protestant and Catholic communities are embedded in language and topography. Lovingly dwelling on place-name, he continues to draw from a rich store of personal memory, but all opens much wider perspectives of history." Heaney uses these place-names as political imagery because the very naming of places like Anahorish, Moyola, Boagh, Nebeigard, Derrygrave, Lagan, Kildare, Toome, Aarhus, Bruges, Donegal reminds the readers of the distinct political-cultural identity of the Irish people. Along with these borrowings in place-names, Heaney also digs up the history of linguistic dispossession of Northern Ireland. He calls his Gaelic tongue soft and feminine and contrasts it with the masculine, consonantal language of England:

Our guttural muse was bullied long ago by the alliterative tradition, her uvula grows vestigial, forgotten like the Coccyx or a Bridg's Cross Yellowing in some out-house ... (Winterring Out)

But now the poet asks the guttural muse to speak up in a voice of militancy: But now our river tongues must rise From licking deep in native haunts To flood, with vowelising embrace, Demesnes staked out in consonants.

(A new song) In his next book, Stations

(1975), Heaney suspends temporarily his tactic of politicizing silence and opts for direct speech. Politics becomes the overt subject matter and sectarian confrontations become the main concern. But here, again, we see Heaney to be unsure of the relevance of the role of the poet as a public spokesman. In the words of Cahil, "while the poet commits himself of the one hand to the role of public spokesman, when the time arrives he does not ascend to the rostrum."

North (1975) is possibly Heaney's most outspokenly political book. But even there he follows his usual tactic of hiding his political tone, this time under the myth of a barbaric Viking past. It contains the so-called 'bog poems' wherein there are stories of the unearthing of the bodies of the people who were presumably sacrificed to Mother Goddess of Earth in Iron Age. (A number of bodies of such victims of ritual violence were excavated in surprisingly good condition in some peat-bogs in Aarhus.) Heaney establishes a link between this barbaric past and the present violence history of Northern Ireland.

Many of these victims were strangled or hand their throats cut. They are the silent reminders of a past barbarousness just as the poet considers himself a silent onlooker of the terrible blood bath around him at present. Like the bog victims, his own speech is strangled and, in several poems, he mentions his inability to articulate the atrocities committed against his own people. "Ocean's Love to Ireland" is one such poem. Sir Walter Raleigh's rape of his Irish maid becomes the symbol for the modern rape of Ireland



by England. In 'Punishment', a bog poem, the poet contemplates the body of the hanged 'adulteress': "I can feel the tug of the halter at the nape of her neck, the wind on her naked front. He feels pity for her, but he knows that had he lived during her time, his reaction would have been silent hatred for her persecutors. (See box)

In Field Work (1979) Heaney's attachment to his native soil takes on a meditative intimacy that successfully hides (or reveals?) his political purpose. But in many of the poems unquieting questions are asked about life which can be taken as allegorical and whose answers the poet fails to find. In one such poem, 'Sibyl', the poet asks "what will become of us?" Sibyl's answer is riddle-like but any perceptive reader of Irish poetry would guess the meaning:

The ground we kept our ear to for so long Is flayed or calloused, and its entrails Tented by an impious augury. Our island is full of comfortless noises.

Field Work is the most questioning of Heaney's books. The questions arise out of the fear and uncertainty that accompany life in his native land. They are directed either to friends, neighbours, Sibyls or to himself: "who's sorry for our trouble?" (After a killing); "What will become of us?" (Sibyl); "My sweet, who wars the boys/in our green land above, whose is the life/Most dedicated and exemplary?" (An Afterwards); "How perilous is it to choose/not to love the life we're shown?" (The Badgers). There is no one to answer these questions. Even the questions asked in silence, meet with stony, immovable silence.

In the ultimate analysis, Heaney is certainly not an outsider to the political reality of Northern Ireland, and, to the dismay of his detractors, his poetry has gained a potent political force in a subtle but sure way. The straitjacket of conventional political poetry does not fit him, but his use of silence as a language of protest may be an eye opener for those who consider poetry to be nothing but cutting capers to the sound of the political kettle-drum

Adobe Architecture

Continued from page 9 tion of the maxim 'form follows function.' In our contemporary regional architecture, design must conform to all requirements of modern usage, but in interpreting these requirements, elevation and ornamentation are consciously composed of symbolic forms to provide an additional emotional and spiritual value. It is for this reason that walls are slightly battered and that bricks on parapets are sometimes clipped to accentuate the curve of contoured outline. This is done not necessarily to imitate adobe, but to recall, by means of a conventionalized symbolic form, the heritage of ancient buildings or the characteristic shapes of the landscape. For the same reason walls recall the

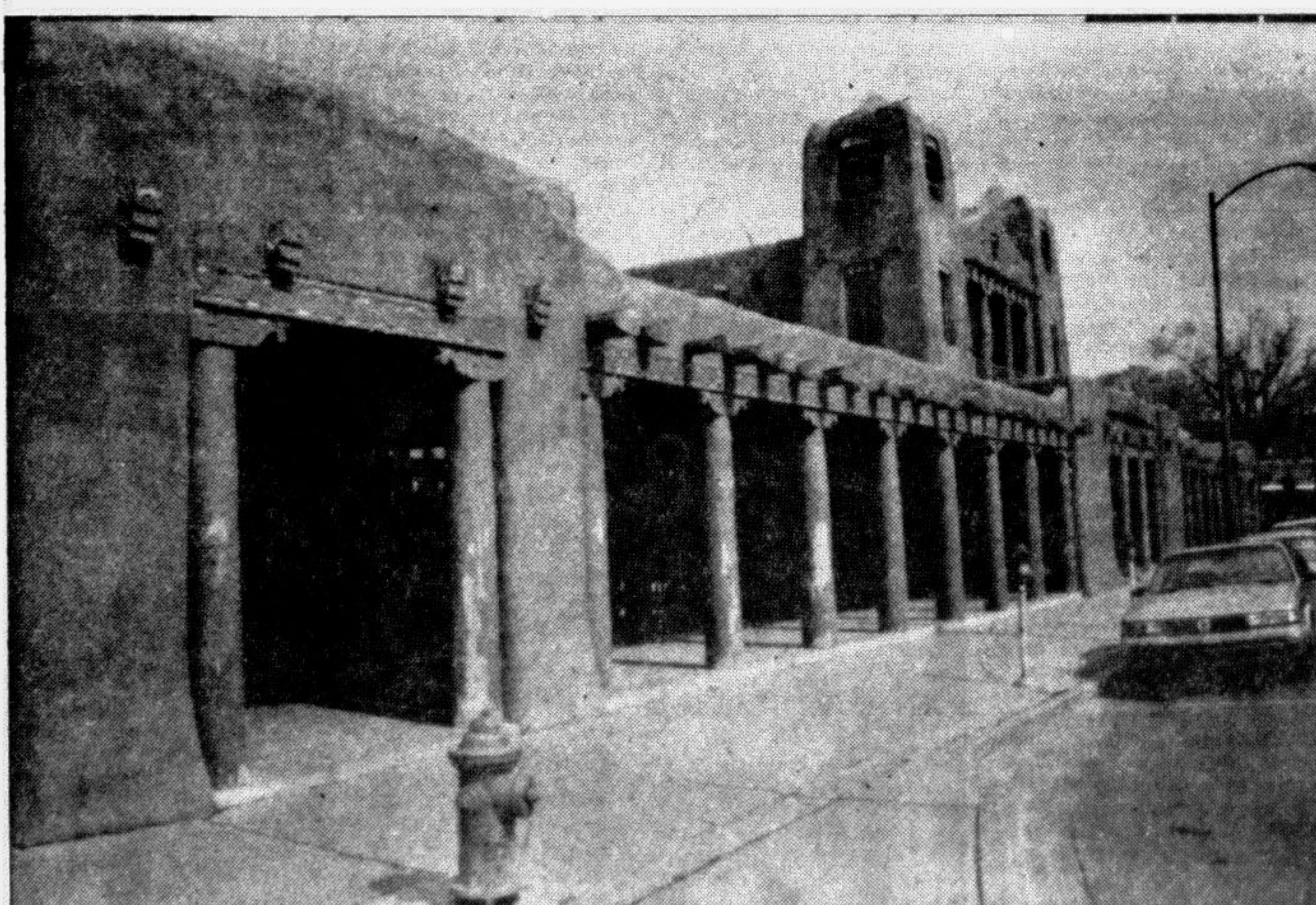
colour of the earth and ornamental detail utilizes Indian and Spanish motifs.

Among the major buildings Meem designed in the Spanish-Pueblo style is the University of New Mexico, a group of some three dozen buildings. For his work on the university buildings, Meem was awarded a doctorate honoris causa in Fine Arts in 1960. The citation commented on Meem's achievement: "By capturing the soft earth colours and characteristic shapes of the landscape, and through a sensitive use of symbolic design, he has been able to recall both the form and spirit of the ancient and rich heritage of the southwest while meeting the contemporary traditional requirements of a

growing university."

Even when one realizes that Wright was making a point and that a lot of regional architecture is simply imitation and commercial —

the most blatant perhaps being the plastering of buildings to pueblo-ize them — there is still something very attractive about walking down streets and plazas with soft-contoured buildings in warm earth colours. Despite the "touristic" character of Old Town, Albuquerque, and the plaza in Santa Fe, one succumbs to the charm of adobe. The campus of the University of New Mexico, the Museum of Fine Arts at Santa Fe and the newly expanded Convention Center in Albuquerque make even the most casual visitor aware of how one's ancient heritage can inform and inspire the present, of how ancient architectural forms can meet contemporary needs to create buildings both functional and aesthetic.



Plaza, Santa Fe

Poor Women in a City Church

The small wax candles melt to light, Flicker in marble, reflect bright Asterisks on brass candlesticks: At the Virgin's altar on the right Blue flames are jerking on wicks.

Old dough-faced women with black shawls Drawn down tight kneel in the stalls Cold yellow candle-tongues, blue blue flame Mince and caper as whispered calls Take wing up to the Holy Name.

Thus each day in the sacred place They kneel. Golden shrines, alter lace, Marble columns and cool shadows Still them. In the gloom you cannot trace A wrinkle on their beeswax brows.

Viking Dublin : Trial Pieces

It could be a jawbone or a rib or a portion cut from something sturdier: anyhow, a small outline

Was incised, a cage or trellis to conjure in. Like a child's tongue following the toils

Of his calligraphy, like an eel swallowed in a basket of eels, the line amazes itself

eluding the hand that fed it, maybe, was drowned in the Flood."

My words lick around cobbled quays, go hunting lightly as pampooties over the skullcapped ground.