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Philippine Education: Some Observations from History

JOSE S. ARCILLA

A French traveller to Manila wrote in 1846:

The education of the *criollos*, as well as of the mestizos and *indios* of both sexes, is not as neglected as some people think. On the contrary, the colony has always expended the greatest efforts to educate the people. Even in the smallest villages, the *indios* find facilities to learn to read and write, for everywhere there are primary schools maintained by the *pueblo*. On the other hand, the aptitude [to learn] of the *indio* is remarkable. One sees them from their tenderest age tracing letters with a sharpened bamboo, sometimes on the sand, other times on green banana leaves. One also finds among them many excellent calligraphers The education therefore of the *indio* is far from being retarded when compared with that of the common people of Europe.¹

About twenty years later, in 1863, the colonial government in Manila issued a decree on primary education. It specified that of the two objectives of the Spanish colonial policy, the second, which was to civilize the Filipinos, was largely frustrated because of the geography of the islands and the "*caracter y costumbres*" of the people. The decree therefore sought to remedy the situation by establishing, among others, a teacher-training school. Since the "foundation of all education" was Christian faith firmly rooted in the hearts of men, the decree continued, this school for teachers was entrusted to the Jesuits.²

¹ Jean Mallat, *Les Philippines* (1846), II, 246.

² An English version of this decree is found in Galang (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Philippines*, IX.

About twenty more years after, in 1886, a Dominican missionary bewailed the deplorable educational program in the missions of Cagayan:

. . . the schools are as deserted now as they have been since the past. There are towns where it is little less than impossible to maintain regular attendance of the boys and girls at school. In general, these contribute: the dispersal of the settlements (and this is the primary cause), the laziness of the parents, the neglect of the *gobernadorcillos*, the lack of teachers, on occasion the absence of school buildings but always their ruined condition, the lack of books, paper, tables — of everything, in a word, needed in the school. This should have been one of the things which the government of each province should have watched . . . a vigilance not satisfied with written orders issued in threatening words, or passing circulars eloquently phrased — all this is celestial music. But in this land, one understands very little of generalizations; one needs detailed implementation in each concrete case. The few children who attend do so only at the urging of the parish priest . . . when the priest is gone [to make the rounds of his mission], the school is immediately deserted until the moment when the children calculate that the priest would be returning.³

These lengthy quotations from documents separated by about twenty years from one another show that education in the Philippines by the second half of the nineteenth century was a picture of contrasts. In Manila, where the Filipinos had the most contact with the Spaniards, education was successful and its schools compared favorably with the European institutions of learning. But where there was virtually no contact, as in mission areas newly opened to the gospel, education was dismally neglected. It was in order to remedy this disparity that educational reforms were decreed in 1863. But the missionary report of 1886 shows that the decree was not completely successful. Even in Pangasinan, one of the richest provinces of the country, education at this time was "as it used to be 25 years ago [1861]. Not one child can speak Spanish. Most children try to learn to read and write any way they can. If a father wants his child to learn to speak Spanish and the rudiments

³ Fray Pedro Nolasco de Media, O.P., "Memoria" (1886): Archivo de la Provincia del Santísimo Rosario (APSR), Manuscript section, "Cagayan," folios 230-231.

[of education], he is forced to look for private teachers paid out of his pocket, or send him to Manila."⁴

The report continues that the reason for the sad state of education in Pangasinan was not the low pay of the teachers. It was rather the disproportion between the pupils and the teachers. Whether a town had 250 or 1000 pupils, there was only one male and one female teacher, despite the provision of the law that for every 80 pupils there should be an assistant teacher. Besides, the parents did not send their children to school because they had no confidence in the teachers who were "normally youths . . . unmarried, strangers to the town, inexperienced, tactless in their social relations, and . . . played favorites of the children from wealthier families"⁵

It is good to begin this discussion with a few documents from the past. They picture the state of education just a few decades before the end of the Spanish government in the Philippines. But before any conclusions are made, it is good to recall the historian's distinction between the so-called "farm colonies" and "exploitation colonies." Farm colonies were generally located in the temperate zone and had the same climate as the mother country, producing, therefore, the same prime commodities as Europe. Their exports were similar to the goods of Europe and did not command a large market there. Such colonies, as the first 13 states of the United States, were founded by settlers in search of a refuge from political or social troubles at home. They came not primarily to amass wealth, and export for profit was a secondary objective. They were content to fulfill moderate needs and they did not seek to own large estates but were satisfied with small farm holdings. That is why these colonies were called farm colonies.

Exploitation colonies were nearly always located in the tropics, or in a climate different from that of the mother country. They were blessed with certain advantages in the texture of the soil and in the climate for the production of goods not

⁴ Fray Francisco Carrozal, O.P. "*Memoria de Pangasinan, 1886*": APSR, MSS, "Pangasinan," folio 9.

⁵ *Ibid.*

easily obtainable in Europe. The attention of the settlers was turned primarily to exporting a few staple products, as sugar, cotton, gold or silver, all of which were in demand in Europe. The impulse was strongly economic, the accumulation of wealth. And, unlike the farm colonists, those who went to the tropics wanted to own large tracts of land for exploitation in order to profit most from them. The Philippines, just as many South American colonies of Spain, was an exploitation colony.

For obvious reasons, the home government wanted to keep control of exploitation colonies. It sought to impose its own government and make colonial society a replica of the metropolitan society. Much of the colonial program was, therefore, an effort to transfer the home culture to the colony. In the Philippines, this was known as the hispanization of the Filipinos. It should not surprise then if Philippine education was patterned after the educational program in peninsular Spain.

This would explain the negative attitude of the first Spaniards in the Philippines toward the manifestations of indigent culture. Their point of reference was Hispanic culture, *Hispanidad y policía*, and anything else was barbaric or uncivilized. And because of the peculiarities of Spanish history, the Spaniards equated culture with *Cristiandad* and to be cultured or civilized was to be a Christian.

As is known, initial optimism in the conquest of the Philippines quickly died away. There was no gold or silver here as in New Spain or Peru, and Spanish presence in the islands continued mainly for evangelical motivations. The educational endeavor thus initiated was merely subsidiary to the task of christianization. The earliest educational agencies were catechetical centers at which, as the Jesuit Father Pedro Chirino wrote, one "took his degree" and was baptized.⁶

But catechetical instruction was not as simple as it seems, for it demanded certain academic skills. To begin with, both

⁶ Pedro Chirino, S.J., *Relación de las Islas Filipinas* (1603). Cfr. Blair and Robertson, *The Philippine Islands*, 13:95-96, for the English version of this particular passage.

natives and missionaries had to have some linguistic skills in order to understand one another. Not all concepts of the new religion could be expressed in the native dialects and the solution was simply to use the Spanish or Latin word, enriching in the process the language of the people. Thus one finds in the Visayan version of the prayer "Hail Mary," the words *grasia, Dios, santa*. And the need to supplement oral lessons with the written word led to the adoption of the Roman alphabet and script, which also brought in the printing press, a cultural event not yet fully evaluated by Philippine historians. And, of course, the teaching of religion was not confined to theory. The neo-Christians were obliged to re-order their life according to the new beliefs and new codes of behavior, which in itself was an entire education of the people. The results can still be seen today — in the peculiar art style of the Filipino *santos*, in the churches styled earthquake baroque, in the holy week singing of the *pasión* and, one might add, in the privileged position of women in the Philippines, which was not true of the other Asian countries until very recently. Other results there were, but one has no time to catalogue what have become part of Filipino religious life reorganized and redirected by those brave missionaries of Spain.

It would be wrong, however, to say that the missionaries had brought only a program of religious education. Such words as *piskal, bintana, koselba*, or *munisipio* are evidence of a restructuring of native society. For if pre-hispanic life revolved within a social or political system similar to what had been introduced by the Spaniards, these and similar words would not have been integrated into the native dialects.

Meanwhile, Manila catered to the needs of the Spanish community there. Some Filipinos also had their homes in the city, but the arbiters of the day were the Spaniards. They had their schools where the students were trained from the first letters of the alphabet to the arts and theology. There was, for example, the Jesuit Colégio de San José, or the Dominican Colégio de Santo Tomás. There was the Colégio de Santa Potenciana for girls, and the Colégio de San Juan de Letran, originally a center for orphans established by the Spaniard Juan Geró-

nimo Guerrero. All these institutions were meant for students of Spanish blood and their curriculum was very similar to those in the schools of Spain or America. The first written statutes, for example, of the University of Santo Tomas were copied from the Dominican school in Mexico. Even if one admits that in due time native students, that is *indios*, were admitted to these schools, the main student population was Spanish.

What may be concluded from this? Namely, that there is need to be very clear about the word "education." There is enough evidence to show that pre-hispanic society in the archipelago had a system of education. But it disappeared with the coming of the Spanish missionaries. There was a native priestly class and naturally acceptance into the ranks of the *baylans* came after a period of training and apprenticeship. Certain norms of behavior had to be learned. These were still in force even as late as the last quarter of the nineteenth century in Mindanao. A Jesuit missionary in Davao Oriental wrote that a baylan who felt nauseated during their religious ceremonies when she sucked with her lips the warm blood of the still quivering victim was branded as a bad priestess. In Batanes, the Dominican missionaries were in admiration of the tradition of authority in what might be described as Philippine feudalism. Each group of houses was ruled by a chief (*Mangpus*), who had supreme and absolute power over all. Under him were various subordinate officials (*Mapolon*) who enjoyed limited jurisdiction over a smaller area or subdivision of the community. Subject only to the Mangpus, the Mapolon ruled their own little sub-groups independently and, only when they needed outside help did the Mangpus come to succor them. Likewise, all over the archipelago, the people were bound by an unwritten moral code whose sanctions were so severe that failure to atone for one's faults, like stealing or seducing a maiden, was punishable by either slavery or death. And one must not omit that the chronic intertribal wars among the natives demanded a ready band of fighters, skilled through constant training in the manly arts of the *balara* or the *kampilan*. Would all these have been possible without a system of education?

There was education, but it was not through the school. Before the Europeans came, there was no school system in the Philippines because none was needed. But with their advent, society was reorganized and, in sociological language, roles were distributed and specified. The clerk was set aside for writing, the physician for his medical functions, and the teacher in order to train the young. Philippine society, however, did not develop along a straight line. It followed curves and sharp crossings and, at one time, went in an almost complete reversal of direction.

It has been said that had the Spaniards come about 50 years later, they probably would not have conquered the Philippines. The scattered Moslem communities that had begun to settle in Luzon would have had time to consolidate themselves. But even if Legaspi's arrival had stopped the advance of Islam, the new colony was never allowed to develop peacefully. European politics had driven the Dutch to the Pacific and for about fifty years, from 1600 to 1648 when the treaty of Westphalia ended Hispano-Dutch rivalry, the far-flung Spanish colony was hard put to it to repel the Dutch corsairs trying to dislodge the Spaniards from the Philippines. This half-century of defense, at a period when the Spaniards were scarcely settled in the islands, proved a costly thing. Timber had to be felled from the forests, men had to be recruited. All these took a heavy toll of human lives. And if one remembers that, those Dutch wars had effectively tied down the Spanish government for it to be able to attend to the frequent Moslem *vinta* raids that devastated the new Christian settlements in the Visayas and the coasts of Luzon, he will understand why, until the second half of the nineteenth century, there was no effective system of schools outside of the catechetical centers run by the missionaries. On the other hand, Manila's schools had already opened their doors to non-European students, so that some distinction began to appear between the privileged few who had access to the city schools, and the majority of the people in the rural towns, who scarcely knew Spanish except the prayers they had memorized.

A simple judgement on the Spanish educational and school systems in the Philippines is probably not possible. Opinions do not agree but, by and large, there is enough indication that the task was well done. The Jesuit scholar, Father Juan Delgado who finished an encyclopedic history of the Philippines in 1754, wrote that he personally knew many exemplary and learned native clerics who could shame the Europeans. Before him, the rather excitable Archbishop Diego Camacho wrote that he had witnessed an indio defend theses on the entire curriculum of theology as "ably and as wisely as any of the best Spaniards." And, more recently, Father Frederic Fox, S.J., one time the chairman of the Ateneo Graduate School of Education, wrote that the primary schools in Iloilo during the last quarter of the nineteenth century were much better attended and much better maintained than those in many other colonies.

Perhaps, the best index to the success of the educational work of Spain in the Philippines is the armed uprising of 1896. By that time, the Filipinos had learned what it meant to be a self-determining people. They had learned to value human or personal dignity, to defend one's native land, and to hope for a better future for one's children. That is why they fought for equal treatment and equal opportunity with Spaniards. A man like del Pilar suffered the painful separation from his wife and little daughters in order, as he once wrote home, to prepare a better future for his children. The writers of the Propaganda Movement braved death, rather than live under an abusive government. An immature race will not dream of these things, or, even if they did, they would not wish to fight and die for them.

But history turned around. In 1898, a new power came and the Filipinos had a new master. The Americans, of course, were more liberal. Their avowed purpose here was to help the people, to help them establish a good government, ". . . to govern the Philippine Islands for the benefit and welfare and uplifting of the people . . . and gradually to extend to them . . . a greater and greater measure of self-government." This was legalized in the Spooner Amendment of 1900, which gave the American President all the powers he needed to rule this country; and in 1902, the Cooper Act declared the Philippines "un-

incorporated territory," which meant that the islands were not part of the United States of America and, therefore, the American constitution did not apply here. For this reason, a different legal framework had to be established for the latter. However, as President Salvador Lopez of UP remarked, this did not forbid the Americans from treating the Philippines as "domestic territory" in foreign affairs, but as "foreign territory" in domestic or internal affairs.

This was most patent in the economic development of the Philippines. Despite some opposition from the first Philippine National Assembly, free trade was approved between the two countries. The Philippines in due time became the supplier of four basic agricultural products to the United States, while in turn becoming one of the best markets for finished American products. At the time, the initial upsurge in Philippine agricultural growth distracted attention from the inner flaw of the system. Some money flowed in and, more significantly, American goods flooded the country. In the beginning, they were luxury goods; in no time at all, they became *necessary goods* — e.g., American shoes, American sports goods, American farm tools, etc. Hence, the demand grew which could be satisfied only with an increased supply of dollars. Dollar supply was available only if the Filipinos continued to export agricultural products, such that a vicious circle entangled the country from which today, 1972, it is very hard to get out. The Philippines, in other words, remained an agricultural economy with an increased tenancy dependent on the few capitalists of the country. Because there was very little industry in the country, it continued being a buyer, not a manufacturer of the finished products which the people needed. The result is what has been termed by a sociologist as the revolution of "rising expectations, but with limited fulfillment."

Another effect of American presence in the Philippines was the republican separation of church and state. The Roman Catholic Church lost its protected position, although the Philippines remained a catholic country. It is perhaps too soon to assess the full effects of the disestablishment of the church in the Philippines. But it is clear that the Catholic Church suf-

ferred a double loss of material resources and personnel, for many Spanish priests returned to Spain. Since there were not enough native clergy, English-speaking foreign missionaries picked up where the Spaniards left off. Unlike, however, the Filipino secular priests in the parishes who barely managed to make both ends meet, the foreign clergy were members of religious orders who enjoyed a corporate existence and seemingly inexhaustible funds from abroad. This gave the impression that the church was foreign and wealthy. This was aggravated by the crucial decision to run private schools, to counteract the secular program of the public schools. Another aim was to train future lay leaders and priests. But the costs of a good Catholic school that depended on the fees of its students severely limited enrollment to the affluent class who had money to spare, further sharpening the image of a foreign, wealthy and exclusive church.

One of the urgent recommendations of the Schurman and Taft Commissions was a nationwide program to educate the Filipinos in self-government. The plan included the use of English in school and in government service (in order, it was said, to unify the people), the emulation of a national hero (Rizal), the inculcation of respect for the nation's flag, and an ever-growing participation in the political tasks of the new democracy. Politically oriented, the plan was received with enthusiasm. Unfortunately, the move toward education and self-government was not seconded by a development in the economic institutions that support self-rule. Democracy succeeded in the United States because it had the necessary economic base. Transferred to Philippine soil where a similar base was lacking, American politics served merely to open the door to another, perhaps more serious, problem. For education and political experience greatly helped upward social mobility among the Filipinos. There soon appeared an intelligent, fairly educated segment of the nation—teachers, lawyers, civil service employees, journalists and writers, physicians, engineers—which swelled the ranks of the traditionally affluent. But not having the economic support to realize the ideals they had learned in the schools, this new intellectual class or, in Marxist terms, “intel-

lectual proletariat," were disappointed and quickly became critical of, even hostile to, the establishment. Having developed a taste for a better life, they found themselves impotent to effect their desires. It is not far-fetched to say that this group and the landless tenants of the country are the potential mass base for a movement to the left.

There is another item to consider. Despite the large budgetary allocations for the public schools before the war, much of the efforts of the government seemed to have been frustrated. There was an increasing rate of school dropouts from Grade Two on, and there were never enough school buildings, texts, or teachers to service the growing school population. If it is true that a child needs at least four years to benefit from the class instruction he receives, the time, money and effort expended on a child who stopped schooling after one or two years may be considered useless expenditure. And because the Philippine government never had enough funds to support the increased demands of the public schools, the result was a compromise, epitomized in the removal of the seventh grade just before the Japanese war, so that elementary education in the Philippines lasted only for six years. The later results of this drastic move are patent to all.

Significantly, the Americans wanted the Filipinos to learn the "dignity of labor." They also sought to train the people in new ways of earning a living, for which vocational schools were opened. The program was quite successful and many Filipinos became skilled artisans. Unfortunately, the plan was conceived in a social vacuum. The students who learned to make furniture went home at the end of the day to a poor house without furniture. They learned to make shoes or produce cloth; but because the Philippines was saturated with finished American goods, there was no market for the fruits of their industry. And because there was no market, there were also no job openings for the skilled labor force that began to issue from the technical or vocational schools. One wonders whether this was a factor that discouraged interest in technical training and the Filipino preference for the white-collar jobs, in preparation for which people are willing to make any sacrifice as long as in the

end one has a college or university diploma. After all, it was easier, if one knew some English, to land a job in the government offices than to try to compete for one's livelihood in the often merciless world of industry and commerce.

Before the Pacific War, these ideas were not articulated. Manila, once the "oriental pearl" of Spain, was America's display window of democracy in the Far East. American presence had effected tangible benefits for the nation, one index of which was the improved health of the people and a sudden increase of population because there was death control but no birth control. At one time, Manila was the home of the best symphony orchestra in the East, and the Philippines boasted of a literacy rate higher than most of Asia. For the country had gone forward in gigantic strides so that, even after the devastation of the Japanese war, she was ready for political independence, the first Asian colony to receive that distinction.

The Philippines is not a big nation. Her history is short. She does not have the traditions that have distinguished such nations as Persia or India. Except during the last war, destruction in the country has been caused, not by war or human carnage, but by the unpredictable power of nature, through typhoons and earthquakes or fires. On the other hand, nature is lavish to the people. It is easy to raise crops here, easy to build a house. No winter haunts a man's sleep if the harvests fail. But one must not forget that the Philippines is more than just a cluster of islands, more than a physical grouping of a brown-skinned people. For a nation is a society of men bound together by a common vision. In Saint Augustine's famous words, it is the assembly of rational multitudes associated by a concordant communion in the things it cherishes. And to a Filipino, the Philippines is that whole complex of things and ideas that in "concordant communion" mean a happy life for him and his loved ones.

Before the Spanish missionaries came, there was no Philippine nation. With their advent, a society grew along lines traced from the Christian message which was delivered here through the intervention of the king of Spain. There has been

much negative criticism of the colonial effort of Spain. But a system that succeeded in producing men of the caliber of Tomás Pinpin, Mother Ignacia, José Burgos, José Rizal, Apolinario Mabini could not have been a total failure. China had already become a great civilization long before Christ was born. But China walled in her greatness, cutting off infection and infiltration by the outside barbarians. Alas, that wall also served to petrify that culture. For if one looks back to the past experience of mankind, he will see that education and progress have always been possible where there was a meeting of minds. What produced the genius that was Dante, if not the Christian experience that purified and freed a native Tuscan soul that finally dreamed and sang of the bliss in Paradise? Shortly before him, what was behind the christian theological synthesis of Thomas Aquinas, if not his open acceptance of *all* human learning and wisdom? The Roman orator Cicero and the Roman poets Virgil and Horace became moulders of the Latin mind because they had distilled the Greek genius into what has since become the foundation of western law and western education. This was what the missionaries had tried to do. They had come with a clear understanding of what they wanted: to lift a people out of the darkness of heathensim, regenerate them through Christian baptism into a new life and membership in what Saint Augustine called the city of God. As briefly indicated, this was not a narrow proselytism, but a total formation of the Filipino, a blending of the best of what was foreign and what was native, the best example of which was perhaps Rizal. The wonder is that in such a short life-span of his thirty-five years, so much learning and wisdom could be assimilated.

The Filipinos, of course, are not all like Rizal. One would hope they were. But, when one begins to question the historical basis of education, there is a justification in saying that it is the Spanish effort to realize a vision of man. For the Philippines, this vision was the Spanish missionary goal. Against all odds, those much-maligned friars had succeeded in forging a unity that bound disparate islands into a nation. In this, however, lies the tragedy of Philippine history. Because they were the creators of Philippine society, the friars believed they were the

indispensable guardians of that society. This ran counter to the inner force of Christianity which is an agency for human freedom and human dignity. In the nineteenth century, when the Christianized Filipinos sought to enjoy their freedom and their dignity, they were met with a rebuff that eventually led to the armed uprising of 1896 and the subsequent intervention of the American government. Unfortunately, the Americans introduced a second beginning through a different program of education. Hardly had the Filipinos adopted to it than Japanese bombs shattered whatever future was awaiting the nation. Since then, it has been, after that painful experience under the Japanese government, a continued effort at reconstruction. The problem now remains: what is to be reconstructed into what?