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# Cultural Process in Lowland Christian Filipino Society

*Niels Mulder*



This article focuses on the history of social thought in and about Philippine society in its development from a family and community oriented world to the problems of articulating culture and public realm in a national discourse expressive of a nation state. One cannot deny the influence of four centuries of colonialism and contact with the west in shaping Philippine society and culture. Almost everything, such as settlement patterns, agricultural practice, food preparation, land transportation, artistic production, and religious expression, was deeply affected by the contact with Spain<sup>1</sup> and exposure to the West. Yet, when in the Philippines, one is very much aware that he is in a country of Southeast Asia.

While international fast food is pretty much the same the world over and one of the outstanding features of the Philippine culture of consumerism, that same mass culture of jeans and coke, of pizzas and pop, also has a distinct Filipino flavor. If even the most trivial commercial and mass-produced products can acquire a Filipino quality—perhaps merely by details such as the refusal to speak the vernacular by the attendants of a MacDonalds—how much more Philippinized must other expressions be that are closer to heart and soul. However mixed-up the symbolic language of the Philippines appears to the outsider, that language holds the highest degree of integrity for the insider whose expectations it expresses. We see Philippine culture in action in the Philippines. Plazas and churches, fast food and flag raising, constitutions and oath taking, are statements about Philippine society past and present.

## **Spanish Roots**

In their quest for nationhood and identity some 'nationalists' still search for the pre-Spanish Filipino, in field research and folklore, in

the hope of discovering a pristine and not colonially contaminated original identity. But perhaps it would be better to concentrate on the deep characteristics of present-day Philippine culture to find out about the past. This is not to belittle the symbolic violence that has taken place,<sup>2</sup> but it does give priority to the obstinate and persistent elements and patterns of culture that give the Philippines its characteristic Filipino identity, in spite of relatively superficial distortions.

Comparatively little is known about pre-Spanish history. So there is much conjecture and conjuring up of the past that fills the pages of many a school book (Mulder 1990, 88–92).<sup>3</sup> Even if the data are correct, the facts alone may not explain much, because culture as a process means that it is forever in flux. Yet, Pigafetta's observation that Filipinos drink a lot and hold their liquor well is still valid for the present. Anthropologically therefore, the San Miguel slogan about the special quality of companionship when drinking (*iba ang may pinagsamahan*), may merely be hinting at cultural continuity.

Though this may seem trivial and superficial, such facts become more interesting when they acquire depth. Was drinking, in public at least, then the prerogative of men? Was it the gregarious *pinagsamahan* that was important? Could one also then be killed for refusing a drink, that is, refusing the other's company? Was drinking, then as now, an expression of manliness? Was society, then as now, setting a valuation on macho behavior?

By raising the historical question of localization and combining it with contemporary observations, one may find Philippine content and the Filipino quality of life hidden behind foreign-inspired epiphenomena.<sup>4</sup> Yet there is no denying that Philippine society also suffers from a historical affliction called "colonial mentality," though it is fashionable to blame Spanish and friar oppression as at the root of it all, it may be better argued that the Americans did the harm.

If there is a Spanish root to colonial mentality it must be looked for in a different area. Centuries of oppression, contempt, and discrimination seemingly explain *Indolencia*<sup>5</sup> and inferiority feelings, but the same "causes" also explain the rise of nationality and nationalism, critical awareness and protest, and the thinking that inspired Propaganda, Revolution, and Republic. Because of economic opportunity, European education, and exposure to modern western ideas, a self-confident class had arisen that aspired to participate in European culture and whose *ilustrados* were firmly rooted in western intellectual tradition.<sup>6</sup> A few of these *ilustrados* realized their dilemma—that of being native to the Philippines and of thinking in

terms of a western "great tradition" that had no roots in their country. That dilemma spelled out their colonial mentality. Consequently they searched for origins and identity in the early Spanish sources (Morga 1890) or in local folklore.<sup>7</sup>

Had the politically elitist leading class of the Malolos republic had its way, the implanted great tradition would have developed roots. There was certainly no contradiction between an authoritarian style of leadership and local family and political traditions. Moreover, elite culture and its western trappings had formed slowly in the long colonial period and seemed to fit the environment. Culturally, therefore, the break with Spain was not a watershed event, but a mere change of government in a continuing history.

### **The Advent of the Americans**

The real rupture was the cultural break with the past occasioned by the advent of the Americans, a break, of course, that took some time to accomplish, but that resulted in a new generation without history, a generation without fathers and grandfathers. Where the Spaniards succeeded in awakening a people and bringing a nation to life, the Americans doused that enthusiasm by bringing a generation of privileged politicians to the fore without great plans or vision (Stanley 1984, "Introduction").

Elections and political prize-fighting became the favorite national pastime, reminding one of both of the fiesta and the cockfight. But the original cry for "immediate independence" ceased to be profitable once the Commonwealth was in place. Since that time plans and platforms have largely been absent in Philippine politics (Golay 1: 13-30). Politics is about privilege, power and pelf, centering on persons, not on programmes, all of which is consistent with old patterns of authoritarian, elitist leadership that let "public affairs" be the private affairs of "men of prowess." It is the contests among the latter that make politics a spectator sport for the masses and an expression of what the NDF likes to call the semi-feudal, semi-colonial mode of production.

What is the meaning of this break with the past if the Americans were unable, in their "efforts to prepare for Independence," to affect basic patterns of production, leadership and politics? By means of their educational policy, which brought boat loads of teachers and new ideas, the Filipinos were mentally recolonized in a discourse that

not only extolled American culture, its standards, history, and idea of progress, but that also degraded the Spanish colonial past. In this way it is fair to speak of a rupture in cultural reproduction, of relegating the past to insignificance, of interrupting the discourse that had created the nation in the face of Spanish oppression, of erasing or at least gravely distorting the collective memory, of aborting whatever could have grown into a distinct Filipino civilization.

Americanism substituted the future for the past. Filipinos became a nation without history, became the future, directed toward "progress" without a clear goal, a nation in limbo, outward directed to and protected by Mother America who shielded her ward from all cosmopolitan ideas that were displeasing to her. "Progress" became the goal in the absence of progressive, nation building ideas, "progress" in the absence of a national discourse, "progress" in terms of borrowed, expedient ideas.

The ideas the Americans imposed were first of all ideas about politics and government, ideas about the ordering of the public sphere. In the Philippine context these ideas were completely divorced from their original consensual, moral content. As ahistorical, colonial impositions, these ideas stood for a technical order of impersonal control, of law. Whereas this may have been in America's best self-interest, this preparation for self-rule and independence was self-contradictory. How to prepare for "early independence" while suppressing nationalism? How to create a civil public sphere, a commonwealth, by not allowing public participation, by discouraging a grounded discourse of the nation as a moral body politic filling that public sphere? With the destruction of history and nationalism, the culture of politics focussed merely on power and contesting personalities. In the process the Philippines also became a nation of lawyers.

The American ideas did not fit any preexisting reality and could not be rooted. They descended from "God's own country" and were held to be very superior. What the Americans were able to accomplish was to impress their superiority. For a long time American ideas about almost everything under the sun were held to be authoritative, worthy of admiration and emulation. By using these ideas to measure their own condition, certain Filipinos became greatly impressed by their inferiority, creating an undeniable measure of cultural dependency and insecurity, a cultural "bi-nationalism" that denigrates their own and imitates the foreign model.<sup>8</sup> In this way "colonial mentality" became institutionalized.

## Philippine Independence

It is this fantastic corruption of culture that characterized most members of the political class and the educated public when independence was granted at a time when the country lay in ruins, and that not only in a literal way. Whatever decency was still in place after the devastating experience of the war, was soon corrupted by making collaboration a non-issue, by backpay and war surplus profiteering, by the rape of democratic representation and tinkering with the constitution. In as far as a stable bureaucracy had existed as the backbone of the state, it was thoroughly subverted by patronage politics (Corpuz 1989, 570-71), the interests of political dynasties assuming the place of the common good.

As a result of the American period the better educated stratum of society suffered, wittingly or unwittingly, from various forms of cultural alienation. By their education and urbanity they naturally placed themselves at a great distance from the ordinary Filipino people. By their Americanization they learned to forget their origin, history and national roots. By their intellectual and artistic dependency many, sooner or later, realized their provincialism vis-a-vis the western heritage. By using the standards of a foreign "great tradition" they were constantly reminded of the flaws of their own society.<sup>9</sup> By their own anchoring in Philippine everyday life, they experienced the incompatibility between a moral private sphere and "official" public life. Uprooted in more than one sense, most clung harder still to the American heritage, at the same time that some began to doubt the value of cultural dependency while protesting the noncreative sterility of "colonial mentality."

The best known personalities who stand at the beginning of the "Second Propaganda" in the 1950s, are the politicians Recto and Tañada, the historian Agoncillo, and the social activist author Amado V. Hernandez. Their nationalism was not widely understood and was threatening to most, yet it provided the basis for a nationalist awakening in the 1960s. Only then students and intellectuals began to look at their own condition, to be interested in history, to scrutinize the still colonial school education, to look for security and vision in progressive thought, to discover Marx and Marxist analysis, to become socially and politically aware, and to ask disturbing questions about the status quo, about social justice, Philippine identity and nationhood. Awareness grew of the dysfunctionality of the political system, the colonial-feudal mode of production, of the awesome gap

between elite and people, *et cetera*. Protest against the order of society and its traditional politicians ranged from the founding of the New People's Army (NPA) in 1969 to the vehement, protracted student protests of the first few months of 1971 that became known as the First Quarter Storm, to the declaration of Martial Law in September 1972.

From the late 1960s, elements of progressive ideological thinking and social analysis began to infiltrate public thought. For some this process was greatly stimulated by the imposition of Martial Law, while others retreated from ideological positions. On the one hand, most ideologically based movements and organizations that exist today, and the phenomenal growth of the NDF, can be traced back to the period of Marcos' dictatorship. But Martial Law also created a generation of martial law babies, that is, those who had their schooling during those years. The Education Development Plan of those days claimed to be "reform directed at problems of national identity" and succeeded in bringing a generation of students to the fore that was highly outward directed, away from questions of nation and/or ideology, and almost devoid of a historical or cultural perspective (Doronila Abaya 1988, 75). In short, they were a generation of perfect television watchers with little if any political awareness.

For only a short time after February 1986 moral issues, such as national reconciliation, human rights, good government, social justice, and constitutionalism, were allowed to interfere with political expediency. Soon such issues were drowned in the usual rhetoric of traditional politicians, relegating the public sphere to an area of moral vagueness. Although this vagueness fit the culture of mass media and the interests of political dynasties (Mulder 1991, 60-62), it stimulated the vitality of all kinds of cause orientation, bringing together people who reflected on moral issues, from feminism to land reform, from cultural dependency to national self-assertion, from patriotism to justice with peace, from antimilitarization to political reform, from debt repudiation to environmental issues, from unionism to child prostitution, from poverty to moral recovery, and so forth.

This is not the place to describe these educated middle stratum and lower class based movements, their ways of organizing, and their political aspirations (see Mulder 1992a). The point here is that many people started thinking, that this thinking essentially addressed public issues, that it was the creation of thinking about the order of

public life, of the common good, a type of thinking that originally arose during the Propaganda Period and that was effectively suppressed by the Americans and their elite supporters whose peddling of "early" or "immediate independence" and "democratic government" could hardly camouflage the fact that politics is about power and personal advantage, and not about the common good, about *res publica*.

This could only be expected. By its very nature colonial government cannot enjoy a high degree of legitimacy in the eyes of those who fall under its sway. The new, neo-colonial rulers who took over in 1946 did not boost their legitimacy by morally exemplary action, and perhaps with the brief exceptions of Magsaysay and Aquino's first years, we should realize that Philippine society has no tradition of a legitimate, a morally backed state, and that the public sphere has not evolved into a moral order. State and public order belong to the sphere of amoral power and exist in separation from the religious and nonexpediential norms that belong to the private sphere of the family.

Now, a hundred years after the original Propaganda, a culture of the public sphere seems to be arising that centers on moral issues, on the legitimacy of the state in terms of nationalism, social justice, and popular political representation. This culture is being developed by committed members of the educated middle stratum who, in one way or another, are dissatisfied with elite politics and cultural dependency.

In view of a great variety of points of departure and often unclear theoretical positions, the various groups of intellectuals developing critical social thought had, for a long time, difficulty in finding each other and taking each other seriously. In line with the fractious character of the Philippine social process, they stayed apart from each other and would rather denounce the others than engage in serious debate. Meanwhile, though, it seems that the insight is growing that the various strains of critical thought sprout from a common experience and history, that the issues concerned are basically connected, and consequently a willingness to discuss and coalesce is emerging. This could be the beginning of a national discourse that is inward, Philippines oriented, a discourse expressive of an intellectual self-confidence, and most of all, a discourse that transcends the immediacy of politics.<sup>10</sup>

Whether the "objective conditions" for such a discourse are in place is not clear, but the moral bankruptcy of traditional politics and



militarization is increasingly evident to most (David 1991, 45-54). An important development is the urge to listen to the voices of the dispossessed, in other words, to treat ordinary people as if they matter and to address their poverty as a serious national problem. This reaching out to them by BCC and NGO activities not only illustrates the relative impotence of government but is an important cultural and nation building event in which the question of social justice prevails over nationalism.

Yet, nationalistic questions remain important and divisive. Questions of national language, the American bases, centralism versus regionalism, still are very emotional and potentially obstruct the growth of a national discourse, unless they are dealt with in a moral-rational way. On the other hand, media may have a positive influence in relating the various parts of the country to each other, in involving people in each others' lives. In this respect the national school system also has a great potential. Although it is gratifying to see a gradual decolonialization of the materials for the teaching of social science (history, geography, economics, culture, civics, and national identity), one sometimes despairs at the snail's pace of curricular change and the low priority given to cultural engineering and growth.

From the English language press during the 1980s, especially after August 1983 and then February 1986, it is clear that a tremendous amount of interest is invested in the potential of the rule of law and constitutionalism, in the relationship to the USA, in peace, and that the obstacles are gradually being identified. These days the ruling elite and traditional politics are more and more often recognized as the enemy within to be blamed for all the ills that beset the country. Another thing of note is the questing and very frequent occurrence of the word Filipino in the newspapers, whether or not in the perspective of moral recovery. This indicates a growing tendency towards becoming more self- and inward directed, more self-dependent and less colonial minded.

### **The Contemporary Scene**

Whether all this is enough for the emergence of a civil culture of the public sphere and the restructuring of the country's institutions must, for the time being, be doubted, because of the near absence of a role for the state. Some people would have it, that states make

nations, and what we see in the Philippines is a cultural process from below that propagates the nation. Where this process collides with the vested interests of the elite that dominates the state, one cannot but expect that it will fight back. The dim prospect of segments of the army taking over does not augur well for cultural growth either. Although, sometimes having a clear target may stimulate awareness.

There are more subtle problems, though, that blur cultural direction. Overzealous (Tagalog) nationalism and anti-Americanism collide with the sense of history and cosmopolitanism of many intellectuals who are outward oriented and consider themselves citizens of the world. This attitude is perhaps most characteristic among members of the English-speaking educated public. But these people and their style also set the example for a middle class that is not interested in innovation, and that is alienated from a native base while lacking a "great tradition" of its own.

Openness to the outside world and the emigration perspective are very real characteristics of contemporary Philippine culture and may partly explain the seemingly irresistible advance of the mass culture of consumerism with its foreign produced fancies and fashions. This does not only bring in apples and American movies, but also an abundance of English language television with its outlandish role models and glorification of violence. The free enterprise and fully commercialized broadcast media may dull the senses, stifle creativity, and depoliticize in spite of all private conscientization efforts to the contrary.

A similar effect may be expected of the many holier-than-thou and other rightist religious sects that are actively, and successfully, recruiting among all segments of the population. Consumerism, mass media, and religious zeal are perhaps not really constructive of a viable civil public sphere and may, together with all the energy spent in the struggle for survival and the prevailing culture of the family, offer a tremendous challenge to the ideologues and intellectuals with all their coalitions in their efforts to create a just national community.

## Conclusion

The depth, persistence, and elaboration of certain originally Spanish cultural forms in Philippine life can be explained by the fact that they connected with what was available in the local cultures. In that

way Spanish Catholicism could to a large extent be appropriated and develop as the symbolic expression of the family and reinforce the position of the mother as the moral anchoring point in life. It also justified authoritarianism and the cult of manliness. Other things that belonged to the original package, such as sin or the legitimate state, did not find roots, and remained marginal to the cultural process (Mulder 1992b).

Spanish cultural forms grew to become part of the national expression of the Philippines, transcending and unifying the different local cultures. Toward the end of the Spanish period a Hispanized leading class was in place whose intellectuals were rooted in European thought. A few of them recognized their dilemma of not being rooted in a native "great tradition." This condition, however, was no impediment to the growth of a national discourse and the discovery of nationhood.

By denying Spanish culture and introducing that of their own, by avoiding the image of oppressor and bestowing political power upon the economic and intellectual elites, by impressing American superiority and progress ("modernity"), by promising early independence yet discouraging a nationalistic shaping of the public sphere, the Americans were able to destroy nationalism, alienated educated Filipinos from themselves, and instituted cultural dependency and a colonial mentality. By driving history and identity out, cultural production became largely sterile, imitative, and superficial.

So, whereas the Spanish heritage was digested and shaped in their own image, the second colonization resulted in attitudes of dependence, mendicancy, imitation, alienation, and self-doubt, thus destroying (national) self-confidence. When the Americans left there was not much of a legitimate state in place and no other culture of the public sphere than the rhetoric of rapacious, dynastic politicians. In short, the growth of a national discourse was arrested for almost a hundred years and it took until the late 1960s before a vision of the nation was in place again.

Marcos's oppression and arbitrariness were instrumental in promoting self- and social awareness that resulted in the multitude of associations striving for emancipation, justice, peace, moral recovery, educational reform, national pride, decency, human rights, etc. It was also instrumental in fostering an outward orientation, social indifference, the logic of familism and economic survival. At present the resulting cultural process can be seen as the development of a culture of the public sphere. In that culture questions of nationalism

should be far less important than questions of social justice. They not always are. The development of that culture in the form of the emergence of a national discourse is thwarted by the powerful presence of disengaging mass culture, religious zealotry, familism, and a persistent outward orientation. A factor that may also retard the growth of a national discourse is the near absence of cultural leadership by the state. Nationalism and a national discourse seem to grow from below, often in protest against whatever emanates from the political center.

### Notes

1. It is the merit of Nick Joaquin to keep emphasizing this unpopular yet important point (see Joaquin 1988).

2. For the application of Bourdieu's idea of symbolic violence to the colonial and postcolonial situation, see Mulder (1990, 85).

3. For a rather extreme, yet recent example of modern myth-making, see Gonzalez (1989).

4. For Southeast Asia, the localization thesis has been developed by the historian O.W. Wolters (1982, 52-55). According to this thesis, the responsibility for the outcome of culture contact lies primarily with the receiving culture in the sense that the foreign cultural elements need to connect to a native stem or root before they can flourish. For its application to interpret contemporary Philippine material, see Mulder (1992b).

5. José Rizal, "La Indolencia de los Filipinos," *La Solidaridad*, 1889, in which the author argues that, if Filipinos are considered to be indolent, such indolence is the fruit of their colonial exploitation rather than an innate trait.

6. *Ilustrados* are the Europe-educated sons of the native gentry and incipient bourgeoisie. In the 1880s in Spain, they pleaded for the equality of the Philippines in its relation to the Peninsula while protesting the obscurantism and economic, cultural, and political dominance of the Spanish friars (clergy). This pleading and protesting became known as the Propaganda Movement that in its turn gave birth to the emancipatory and nationalist ideas that fired the Revolution against Spain (1896-98).

7. Isabelo de los Reyes, Sr., may be considered as the first Philippine folklorist. Later, in the early period of the American occupation, he founded the first labor union, the Union Obrera Democratica de Filipinas (1902); in the same year, he was instrumental in establishing the Philippine independent Church that broke away from the Roman Catholic Church, not only for reasons of nationalism, but especially in protest against its conservatism and continuing friar dominance. This church is also known as the Aglipayan Church, after its first supreme Bishop, Fr. Gregorio Aglipay.

8. The concept of binationalism has been elaborated by Alfred W. McCoy, "The Philippines: Independence Without Decolonisation," in Jeffrey (1981).

9. The irrelevance of American standards to Philippine life has often been argued, for instance, by O. D. Corpuz (1969, 6-18). He reasons that in Filipino politics nepo-

tism is ethically normal and that party loyalty is subject to family-based interests, therefore, "We do [should] not judge ourselves by the irrelevant idiosyncrasies, eccentricities, and even wishes, of alien nations." In a comparable way, Lumbea (1984, 91-101) argues that Filipino literature should be judged by Filipino standards and measured by its relevance to life in the Philippines.

10. National discourse is the continual negotiation and interpretation of those major ideas that express and create national identity and community by a nation's intelligentsia, based on historical consciousness, a shared canon of culture and common experience, and that transcend politics.

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