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The Embarrassment of Slavery, by Salman

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Book Reviews

The Embarrassment of Slavery: Controversies over Bondage and Nationalism in the American Colonial Philippines. By Michael Salman. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2001. xi + 335 pages.

This fascinating work could well be called a history of hypocrisy (conscious or unconscious) in the Philippines from 1899 onwards. The subject matter of that hypocrisy was the existence or nonexistence of slavery in the Philippines. The list of hypocrites is long, and includes almost everyone concerned with the question—American national and colonial authorities, Filipino elite politicians, Filipino nationalists, and many others, all for different self-serving reasons. Only the Sultan of Sulu openly acknowledged and defended his ownership of slaves, as guaranteed to him by the so-called Bates Treaty of 1899. In it he had recognized the sovereignty of the United States, which, in the person of Gen. John C. Bates, in turn promised to respect the “rights and dignities” of the sultan, and not to interfere in Sulu religion or customs.

The political economy of the sultanate was of course based on slavery, as has been amply demonstrated by James Warren, and the sultan had no intention of giving that up. The only mention of slavery in the treaty, however, provided that slaves could buy their freedom from their masters at the market price, thus implicitly acknowledging both the existence and the legal status of slavery in Sulu. The treaty was in fact not legally such, since it was neither formally submitted to President McKinley for signing, nor to the U.S. Senate for ratification. However, it was convenient for McKinley not to say that until the American military forces had put an effective end to the American-Filipino War and enabled them to devote their strength to the subjugation of the Moros. Then the Bates Treaty was unilaterally abrogated.

American officials like McKinley, Root, Taft, Wright, and others alternated between denying that slavery existed at all, and attempting to mollify the American critics, especially the anti-imperialists, by insisting on the “mildness” of Moro slavery. The so-called slaves, they said, “were practically members of the family,” a cruel joke to those who had been brutally torn from their homes and families, beaten into submission, and were now engaged in pearl

diving, climbing mountain crags to obtain edible bird's nests, and other dangerous occupations that were at the heart of the Sulu economy.

Anti-imperialists had their own forms of hypocrisy. They cared nothing about the abolition of slavery in the Philippines. The United States, they asserted, was enslaving the whole Filipino people by its conquest of the country. Whether the Moros enslaved Christian or animist Filipinos was not their concern. The United States should just withdraw and leave the slaves to their masters. In fact, as has often been shown before, many of the anti-imperialists opposed American occupation not because of any sympathy for Filipinos, but because, racist as they mostly were, they did not want a "colored" inferior race to come under the American flag, with or without slaves.

McKinley, Roosevelt, and their administrations denied that they were maintaining or permitting slavery, but claimed they were in fact abolishing it! But it had to be done gradually, in order to avoid a war in southern Philippines. Of course, they had not been concerned about the bloodshed incurred in the subjugation of Catholic Filipinos, fighting for the Republic, as Salman notes. Informally the sultan and his datus in Sulu were assured that they would not have to suffer monetarily in whatever settlement might be arranged for the slavery question. (The implied promise of compensation resulted in a considerable increase of slave-taking in Magindanao and Lanao, in anticipation of reaping bigger profits from the supposed compensation). Such compensation, of course, was soon abandoned as a policy, and after 1902 little was heard about the benign nature of slavery among the Moros.

Salman points out that the reason Americans were long able to consider Moro slavery as tolerable was the fact that the stereotype of antislavery ideology was taken from the American experience of one race enslaving another. In the Philippines there was no racial distinction between slaves and masters. The Americans apparently failed even to reflect that the words for slave were *banyaga*, or *bisaya*, both denoting outsiders, primarily by religion, since, at least in the abstract, Muslims did not enslave Muslims. (In fact, however, at the boundaries between debt-bondage and actual enslaving of Muslims by Muslims, the reality was often different).

Once slaves increasingly began to flee their owners on seeing that the Americans refused to return them or allow them to be recaptured, the move was toward abolition. Taft began to change his earlier attitude of considering slavery "mild," and insisted on its elimination. This came with the creation of the Moro Province in 1903, with Gen. Leonard Wood as military governor, whose first law criminalized slave holding, trading, or raiding. By 1903, large military forces were no longer needed in the North, but both Taft and Wood still felt that abolition could be achieved without undue use of force. The Moro leaders resented their being reduced to ordinary taxpayers like every other Filipino through the introduction of the *cedula*, as well as the limiting of the datu's power to impose fines and thus create debt bondage and judicial enslavement. The "massacres" (the Sulus put their women and children

in front of them to deter the colonial troops) of Bud Dajo in 1906 under Wood, and Bud Bagsak in 1913 under Pershing, as part of the campaign to forcibly disarm the Sulus, effectively brought an end to slavery as an institution. It is unfortunate that in his characterization of these massacres Salman has not made use of the publications on Pershing of Donald G. Smythe.

The second part begins with a chapter entitled "Metaphorics of Slavery and Nation." It is marred by an uncritical adoption of the unsubstantiated postmodernist theories of Vicente Rafael on the assimilation by Filipinos of Catholicism and Hispanic rule. Filipinos saw both dominations, according to Rafael, "as a contract, to be negotiated and redeemed." Salman's own understanding of this background is indicated by his statement that "except in the towns and heavily-churched [!] Tagalog provinces, most natives rarely encountered Spanish *friars* or officials" (125). Officials, yes, but to think Filipinos had little contact with friars [and Jesuits] makes the whole three centuries of Philippine development unintelligible. A similar use of Iletó's more soundly based interpretations is nullified by Salman's lack of understanding of Philippine history in those centuries. Much of the chapter is a confusion of fact, unsubstantiated theory, and misunderstanding. Nonetheless, he correctly recognizes the increasing conceptualization of colonial rule as a form of slavery, to be redeemed by independence, or in the minds of the non-*ilustrados*, by *kalayaan*, a concept embracing much more than the achievement of a national state.

The shift in the second part is to the growing realization by American colonial officials of the widespread slave-raiding by the various upland non-Christian peoples, who were supposed to be under the special care of the Philippine Commission. Here the complex role of Dean Worcester, as head of the Bureau of Non-Christian Tribes, is described in detail. Though certainly long aware of the practice, it was chiefly in response to political events that he took action. Taft, speaking before the U.S. Congress, admitted the fact of enslavement, but conveniently omitted the fact that the Ifugaos, Negritos, and others were not taken by other tribes for themselves, but to sell to Catholic Filipinos.

As this too became known in the U.S., the colonial bureaucracy first emphasized the mild, even beneficial, nature of the practice. One inspector described the process, by which after the purchase "the slave is then put to work in the house, and shortly afterwards baptized, is treated well, learning to speak the prevailing dialect, and no doubt thoroughly appreciates the change." No doubt reflecting the mentality of many Catholic Filipino slaveholders, he further reflected that "the slave owner will make himself believe that he is doing a very commendable thing in rescuing an infidel, and having him brought up to become a good Christian." Though likewise mentioning some of the less pleasant treatment that the slave received, it seems clear that he did not disapprove of the practice.

Taft, of course, was more selective in what he told the U.S. Congress, leaving the impression that it was only among the uncivilized peoples that slavery existed, and that the Commission was doing its best to stamp it out. Only in 1905, however, did Worcester begin to take action against slavery. Being informed that there was no law specifically penalizing slavery, he tried to have cases prosecuted under laws forbidding the kidnapping of a minor, and illegal detention. But the Philippine Commission, in which Americans still held a majority, never saw fit to pass an antislavery law right up to the time that the Philippine Assembly came into being in 1907. Indeed, only in 1911 did the Commission promulgate an antislavery law for the non-Christian provinces, which remained under its jurisdiction. Unsurprisingly, despite pressure from Worcester, the Philippine Assemblymen simply ignored the antislavery bills presented to them and did not discuss the problem.

A new phase began, however, in 1912–1914. How the Philippine nation would be presented in the U.S. became closely tied to the question of whether the Filipinos were fit for independence, a more likely possibility now with the Democratic administration of Wilson and the prospect of the Jones Bill. Former Governor Forbes returned to the U.S., determined to oppose Philippine independence for the foreseeable future. At a speech given while receiving an honorary degree from Harvard, he emphasized that Filipino lack of fitness for independence was proven by the Assembly's repeated failure to pass a law "prohibiting slavery and involuntary servitude."

Resident Commissioner Quezon attempted to rebut Forbes by charging that the Commission deliberately tried to place the Assembly in an awkward dilemma. If they passed such a law, it would be an admission that slavery existed in the Philippines. If they rejected it, they would be accused of being advocates of slavery. Quezon simply denied that there was slavery, but was clever enough to add that if there was "in the territories inhabited by the new non-Christian Filipinos" this could only be due to the negligence of the Commission, under whose jurisdiction these people were. The slaveholders then, said Quezon, are the government officials appointed by Secretary of the Interior Dean C. Worcester. As to Forbes's prediction that in an independent Philippines an oligarchy would "oppress the masses," Quezon cleverly replied, "The present Government of the Philippines is a foreign oligarchy" and hence "worse than a native oligarchy."

The effort to prevent the passage of the Jones Bill providing for Philippine independence took on a fiercer form with Worcester's book, *Slavery and Peonage in the Philippine Islands*. In an attempt to rebut this devastating picture, the Assembly appointed a committee that produced a 300-page volume entitled *Informe sobre la esclavitud y peonaje en Filipinas*. Predictably, invoking Filipinos' understanding of their own society and customs, it denied that there was any real slavery in the Philippines, and even denied that there had ever been historically, except a mild kind of bondage that should not be called slavery.

Much more could be said here, but it becomes increasingly obvious in the argumentation that there was a parallel between the arguments that Americans used to justify continued "benevolent" colonial status for the Philippines with those used by Filipinos to justify the "benevolent" kind of bondage or servitude that in fact had been shown to exist.

In one of Worcester's telling attacks, he charged: "The belief seems common among Filipinos that the act of baptizing wild people, whether with or without their consent, affords adequate excuse for subsequently retaining them in servitude, the favor conferred by the act of baptism being so great that the fortunate ex-heathen ought to be willing to work the rest of their lives in return for it!" No bishop or priest spoke a word.

Salman pointedly remarks on Worcester's charge that "its terms could be applied almost exactly to the justificatory ideologies of Spanish and American colonial rule. In fact Philippine nationalists had spent much effort demystifying Spain's gift of Christianity and would do the same for the benevolent paternalism of American colonialism in the twentieth century."

The book lends itself to a multitude of reflections, not only those of the author. One may think of the *kasama* system in Central Luzon before the war, the *sacada* abuse in Negros then and since, and the not-too-rare cases of real industrial slavery which appear from time to time in the newspapers, not to speak of the occasional kidnapping and enslaving of young Visayans in Lanao.

The bibliography is extensive, both in published books and unpublished papers of key American and Filipino figures. It could have profited by the book of Smythe mentioned above, and for Magindanao slavery, learned a great deal from the first volume of *Jesuit Missionary Letters from Mindanao*, published by Fr. Jose Arcilla in 1990 (and now appearing in a larger series from the U.P. Press).

Salman's treatment of the twentieth century, which is the subject of his book, is excellent. His comparisons with sixteenth-century *alipin*, and the Spanish treatment of slavery suffer from a number of inaccuracies, but do not significantly detract from his treatment of his main topic. The book deserves to be widely read.

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Magosaha: An Ethnography of the Tawi-Tawi Sama Dilaut. By H. Arlo Nimmo. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2001. 261 pages.

H. Arlo Nimmo is well known among Philippine readers, scholars and anthropologists for his moving account of life among the Sama Dilaut of Tawi-Tawi in the mid 1960s. As a young American anthropologist he lived with the boat people of the southern Philippines, commonly referred to as the Badjaos,