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## **Economic Transformation of Negros Oriental**

Caridad Aldecoa Rodriguez

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## Notes and Comments

### Economic Transformation of Negros Oriental CARIDAD ALDECOA RODRIGUEZ

#### A STATIC ECONOMY, 1565 - 1850

Before the 1850s the state of economy in Negros Oriental had not shown much progress. The lack of roads and permanent buildings indicated poor economic conditions. The natives planted just enough *palay*, corn, *camote* and other rootcrops to meet their necessities. The presence of many Negritos was not attractive to the Spaniards who preferred to live in the bigger and more populous districts in the archipelago. Based on government reports in the early nineteenth century, the natives still paid their tribute with forest products like beeswax, honey, rice and others that they used to trade in the sixteenth century. The gold in Negros mentioned in an early report did not materialize.<sup>1</sup> According to Fr. Pedro Sanz, "the island was submerged in the most scandalous misery, scandalous because the misery or poverty was due to the negligence and laziness of the people."<sup>2</sup> To sum it all up Negros from the beginning was a disappointment to the Spaniards.

Cacao was introduced in Negros by a Jesuit priest, Fr. Juan Davila, who was assigned to the parish of Ilog in the late seventeenth century.<sup>3</sup> Like corn it was one of the crops introduced from the New World, but

1. *Census of the Philippine Islands, 1903* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1905), vol. 1, p. 419.

2. Pedro Sanz, *Plan de Misiones Para la Isla de Negros* (Manila, 1881), pp. 9-10.

3. Robustiano Echauz, *Sketches of the Island of Negros*, trans. D.V. Hart (Athens, Ohio: University Center for International Studies, 1978), p. xvi.

it never flourished in Negros as it did in Mindanao. Corn became the staple food of the natives of Cebu, Bohol and Negros, but what was produced was not even enough for home consumption. Whatever small farms were planted to corn were regularly plagued by locusts. An order of the intendant governor general of the Visayas to the *alcalde mayor* of Negros required the burning of the fields from Bais to Samac to kill the larvae of the locust.<sup>4</sup> Typhoons rarely hit southern Negros, but on 25 November 1847, a typhoon caused much damage to houses and crops from Amlan to Bacong.<sup>5</sup> The *gobernadorcillo* of Amlan reported to the *alcalde mayor* of the province that the typhoon brought down the telegraph supports in the place called Tandayag.

Before 1845, external trade was mainly the privilege of the *alcalde mayor* of the province, by virtue of his right to *indulto de comercio*. This trade monopoly was to induce him to stay in the province. Otherwise he would prefer to stay in Manila to take part in the galleon trade. As the galleon had been stopped since 1811 and many reports of abuses of the *alcaldes* of the province reached Manila (reports by the clergy), the privilege was abolished. The decree of 1844 forbade *alcaldes mayores* (governors of the provinces) from engaging in commerce and trade. To make this reform easily acceptable, the salary of the provincial governors was increased from ₱300 to ₱1,500 per annum.<sup>6</sup> The *alcalde mayor* of Negros, Jose Saens de Vismanos (1844-48), complied immediately with this decree.

As the external trade of the province was no longer controlled by the *alcalde*, attempts were made to produce more crops. Rice, abaca and tobacco were exchanged for clothing material from Manila. Sugar, the first commodity for export was sold in Bais and Dumaguete from where it was shipped to Iloilo. Abaca, the second produce for trade, was monopolized by the Chinese and exported to Cebu and Manila.<sup>7</sup> The Chinese also handled the buying of rice, forest products and fish to be sold in their home port of Cebu. Other minor commodities were exported to Manila, Cebu and Iloilo. Imported goods that were in demand in Negros were liquors from Europe, furniture, lamps, glassware, scales,

4. *Ereccion de Pueblo, Isla de Negros, Leg. 109, No. 57, N.A.* See also Jose E. Marco, *Resena Historia de la Isla de Negros* (Manila: Imprinta Tipografica de la Vanguardia, 1912), p. 99.

5. *Ibid.*, No. 96.

6. Angel Martinez Cuesta, *History of Negros* (Manila: Garcia Publishing Co., 1980), p. 150. The provincial governors were also forbidden to own horses, lands, cattle ranches and boats for pearl fishing, directly or through a third party.

7. Echauz, *Sketches*, p. xvii. See *Philippine Studies* 34 (1986):61-76.

steel for ceilings and nails.<sup>8</sup> The ladies of the wealthier class cherished the cloth materials from Europe, while those of the needy class contented themselves with home-woven abaca and cotton cloth.

No industry in the real sense of the word existed in the province. Fishing had no importance although it was practised in all the towns. Fish on the Oriental coast were not of good quality and were not plentiful. A good number of families engaged in the weaving of abaca and cotton cloth which was worn by the field workers and women of the needy class. In Tanjay there existed a distillery which produced whiskey from nipa sap, and which had a capacity of twenty *arrobas* (Spanish unit of weight equal to twenty-five pounds) daily. Amlan and Tanjay made *buri* bags for the packing of *muscovado* (brown) sugar. Mats woven from *pandan* and *ticog* were sold in Ayungon and Tayasan.<sup>9</sup> But not one sugar refinery existed in the province in 1850.

Prior to 1857 the Philippines had no currency of its own. Money of other countries circulated in the islands. No bank or any establishment of credit and savings existed in the province as late as the 1890s.<sup>10</sup> Private lenders charged from 10 percent to 20 percent interest annually, depending on the discretion and guaranty that the debtors could offer. The most common way of borrowing was to get money in advance with the promise to pay in kind at harvest time. Much higher interest was paid for money borrowed in this manner.

#### THE SUGAR ECONOMY, 1850-98

The opening of Iloilo to world trade in 1855 and of Cebu in 1860 increased commercial contacts with Negros and helped make its agricultural potential more widely known.<sup>11</sup> Sugar cane planting started in the early 1850s and, by 1855, according to the data taken by each parish priest, the produce had reached 618,120 piculs, whose value, calculated at ₱3.50 on the average, gives the astonishing amount of ₱2,163,420.<sup>12</sup> Sugar cane cultivation transformed Negros into the most productive island in the whole archipelago.

A great deal of social change came about with the rise of the sugar industry. Immigrants from Panay, Cebu and Bohol swarmed to Negros

8. *Memorias de Negros Oriental*, 1892, Report of Governor P.M. Victor Espada, p. 386. N.A.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 385b.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 389.

11. Ramon R. Lola, *The Philippine Islands* (New York: Continental Publishing Co., 1898), p. 139. See also Horacio de la Costa, *Readings in Philippine History* (Manila: Bookmark, 1965), p. 145.

12. Sanz, *Plan de Misiones*, p. 12.

as entrepreneurs, laborers, small businessmen and peddlers. Spaniards and other foreigners migrated to Negros to establish businesses and carved haciendas for themselves. By 1870 the distribution of population in Negros according to social classes was as follows:<sup>13</sup>

65	peninsulares
294	Espanoles-Filipinos
4,804	Mestizos (Chinese, Spanish and others)
181,802	Indios
165	pure Chinese
<hr/> 187,130	total population

Sugar cane was more widely and intensively cultivated on the Occidental side of Negros than on the Oriental coast, where sizable plantations were found only in Bais, Tanjay, Dumaguete and Sibulan. The rest of the towns produced more abaca, corn and tobacco. In fact wide plantations of abaca were found in Nueva Valencia, Sibulan, Ayuqitan, Bacong, Dauin, Samboanguita and Siaton.<sup>14</sup> It was even predicted that in three or four years the production of abaca hemp would surpass that of sugar cane. Corn was planted in all the towns, especially in Tayasan, Jimalalud and Guihulngan. Surplus corn from these towns was sold to the sugar cane producing towns of Bais and Tanjay. Fiber produced from a tree called *dol-dol* (kapok) was becoming an important product. Cacao and coffee were produced in small quantities.

Problems brought about by the new economy started to surface. For instance, a major problem in the planting of sugar cane was the scarcity of laborers for the hacienda. Many laborers were needed during the planting and milling seasons. Don Juaquin Montenegro, an *hacendero* of Bais complained to Dean C. Worcester an American visitor in 1890, that the natives did not like to work, since their needs were few. Others by sheer deceit, got their salaries in advance and then escaped, only to reappear in another hacienda to repeat the same deception. Don Juaquin preferred to hire laborers who drank, gambled and played the *gallera*, for they had more wants than the moral and sober natives and therefore would work more days in a year.<sup>15</sup>

13. Agustin de la Cavada, *Historia Geografica, Geologica y Estadistica de Filipinas* (Manila: 1876), vol. 2, p. 173.

14. *Memorias de Negros Oriental*, 1892, p. 383.

15. Dean C. Worcester, *The Philippine Islands and Their People* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1899), p. 162.

Only in places where intelligent and industrious Spaniards or *Españoles-Filipinos* dwelled such as Dumaguete, Bais, Bayawan and Vallehermoso, did agriculture develop and prosper.<sup>16</sup> Among the *Españoles-Filipinos* mentioned was Diego de la Vifla of Vallehermoso, who with a handful of hired help, transformed the thickly forested area of Bagawines into thriving farms devoted to sugar cane, tobacco and other food crops.<sup>17</sup> Great stands of hardwood forests vanished to make way for farms. This pattern of transformation of the wilderness was true all over the island.<sup>18</sup>

By 1892, the state of economy of Negros Oriental was relatively satisfactory for the following reasons:<sup>19</sup>

1. The abundant production of sugar which sold at a high price.
2. The production of abaca increased for no typhoons destroyed the plantations.
3. No diseases and calamities diminished the cattle.

There were in the province some 9,500 head of carabao, 5,980 head of cattle, 870 horses, 1,800 sheep, 1,280 goats and 5,000 pigs. In Tanjay and Bais the number of horses decreased, for the owners preferred to butcher and eat them to avoid the taxes demanded by contractors.<sup>20</sup>

Roads also improved by the 1890s. There were two main roads from the capital. The one to the north was 183 kilometers long, and that to the south was 137 kilometers long. One could travel on horsedrawn carriages from Dumaguete to Bais (36 kilometers) and to Samboanguita (25 kilometers). The rest of the distance could be negotiated on horseback.<sup>21</sup> Relations between the towns and the capital were good because of easy communication and short distances. Except during the rainy season, travel between the towns could be done quickly and with ease. Municipal captains looked into the repair of the roads that fell within the jurisdiction of their town. Communication with the island of Siquijor, however, was not so frequent because sometimes the condition of the sea did not permit travel by seacraft. The roads were seldom used in transporting products. Almost all the towns were along the coast and it was easier and cheaper for products to be carried by

16. *Memorias de Negros Oriental*, 1892, p. 383.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 355b.

18. Echaz, *Sketches*, pp. xvii-xviii.

19. *Memorias de Negros Oriental*, 1892, p. 390.

20. *Memorias de Negros Oriental*, 1890, N.A. Report of Governor P.M. Joaquin Tavera.

21. *Costa Oriental de la Isla de Negros* (5 April 1898). Bundle on *Memorias*, N.A. Report of Governor Político-Militar Antonio Ferrer. This is called the *Himampangan* road today.

maritime routes to points of embarkation at Bais, Tanjay and Dumaguete.

The collection of taxes, duties and revenues continued to be a problem in spite of improved economic conditions. The total collection in 1892 compared to that of 1891 in the province were as follows:<sup>22</sup>

Collected in 1892	\$140,041	(Mexican)
Collected in 1891	<u>118,300</u>	
Difference	21,741	

The increase of \$21,741 (Mexican) was from the five towns of Siquijor, where the collection of *cedulas* in 1892 had better results than in the previous year. To facilitate the collection of taxes, people were prohibited from building their houses in their farms or in the far away hills. The natives were obliged to live in the towns, or else build their houses along the roads, but not farther than one kilometer from the town or barrio. Thus aside from facilitating the collection of taxes, this made the natives accessible for the summons of the agents of justice.<sup>23</sup> This caused much inconvenience on the part of the natives, for they could not accomplish much work and pay their obligations to the government. The last Governor P.M. of Negros Oriental Antonio Ferrer y Poyules, reported in 9 April 1898 the following:<sup>24</sup>

We have to confess that the collection of *cedulas* is realized very slowly. Previous orders are continued and frequent reminders are sent so that the *cabezas* will activate the collection of *cedulas*. Sometimes the money does not enter the treasury.

It was difficult for the government to collect the exact amount of tribute in a locality, for during the harvest workers were in the hacienda but when the harvest is finished they would return to their towns of origin. Some of them would flee to the mountains and other remote places far from the towns to avoid paying tribute. Spanish officials pointed out that "here (in the mountains) out of reach of the authorities, they live in laziness all to the disadvantage of the church and the treasury."<sup>25</sup> So the Spanish authorities resorted to strict measures. They

22. *Memorias de Negros Oriental*, 1892, p. 391b.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Costa Oriental de la Isla de Negros*, 1892.

25. *Ibid.*

punished the *cabezas* and *gobernadorcillos*, who in turn were forced to inflict punishment, by flogging, on their fellow natives who did not pay tribute or render forced labor.<sup>26</sup>

### CONCLUSION

The boot-shaped island of Negros, with a total area of 4,905 square miles, is the fourth largest island in the Philippine archipelago. Negros Oriental is on the east and is in many areas narrow coastal strips. But in the early centuries of Spanish rule its rich soil had not been tapped for production, for the Spaniards were not encouraged to stay in Negros which was thickly covered with forests and whose inhabitants were considered primitive and hostile.

Various factors contributed to the poor economy of the place like typhoons, locusts, the lethargy of the natives and Spanish monopolistic policies, like the *indulto de comercio* and the *bandala*. These discouraged initiative and the desire to produce more. Not until these monopolistic policies were abolished and the parts of Iloilo and Cebu were opened to world trade, did Negros Oriental improve its economy. The most powerful impact of Negros agriculture was the success of the sugar industry. By the 1850s immigrants from the neighboring islands flocked to Negros to work in the sugar industry. Not only did society change but also the physical environment was transformed as a result of the new economy and progress.

26. Interview with Mrs. Silveria Duran Aldecoa, Dumaguete, 18 May 1981. As related by her father who was a *teniente del barrio*.