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In Retrospect: The Second International Philippine Studies Conference

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**In Restrospect:
The Second International Philippine Studies Conference**
RESIL B. MOJARES

The annual Philippine Studies Conference is a gathering of Filipinists (or scholars working on Philippine topics) organized by the Philippine Studies Committee of the Association for Asian Studies in the United States. It has been going on for some time but it was only in 1980, with the Philippine Studies Conference in Kalamazoo, Michigan, that the conference decided to turn international. Until then, the conference was largely limited to American scholars in the United States and Filipinos residing or sojourning in the States. For the Kalamazoo Conference, an effort was made to bring in participants from the Philippines, Canada, Australia, and other areas where there are scholars on the Philippines. Hence, the "Second International Philippine Studies Conference" held at the Ala Moana Americana Hotel in Honolulu, Hawaii, 27-30 June 1981.

The Honolulu Conference was sponsored by the Philippine Studies Program of the University of Hawaii at Manoa and the Filipino 75th Anniversary Commemoration Commission. (The Commission was established by the Hawaii Legislature to oversee the observance last year of the 75th Anniversary of the Coming of the First Filipinos to Hawaii, an event which the conference helped mark.) Assistance was extended by the Philippine Studies Committee of the Association for Asian Studies as well as by various cultural associations in Hawaii.

About 200 participants attended the conference, representing the Philippines, the United States, Canada, Great Britain and the Netherlands. From the Philippines came some twenty participants whose attendance was made possible through the Philippine Counterpart Commission for the 75th Filipino Year in Hawaii. (Ofelia R. Angangco, Doreen G. Fernandez, and Elsa P. Jurado did the yeoman job for the Philippine Commission.)

A FEAST OF PAPERS

A conference of this scale has to face problems of focus. There were, after all, thirty panels which included papers, roundtable discussions, films, documentaries, and other audio-visual presentations. With five panels going on simultaneously at any one given period, a participant could do no better than catch a portion of the conference.

The conference revolved around the theme of "75 Years of the Filipino Experience in America," with provision for special panels for strictly Philippine topics which would help to define the "sending society" of Filipino Americans. The exigencies of conference organizing, however, are such that unity is often clearer in conception than in result. Conference organizers have to make do with the paper-readers who are available, the scholars' insistence on dealing with pet topics or (rightfully so) topics within their competence, and other such pesky variables. When the control is loose, a conference takes on the quality of an intellectual multi-exhibition, an academic food-fair of sorts. Even when diligent control is exercised (as in Honolulu), a large multidisciplinary conference will still betray a fraying at the edges. And this is particularly true of an area studies conference where, indeed, a highly varied combination of topics can come to roost.

In Honolulu, the core cluster of papers — constituting more than half of the thirty panels — dealt with the Filipino immigrant experience in America. This covered a wide range of problems: Filipino mutual aid and regional associations in Hawaii and California, institutional inequality experienced by Filipinos in the United States, plantation influences on Hawaii-born Filipinos, the Filipino labor problem in America, employment problems of Filipino women in Hawaii, the psycho-social dimensions of the Filipino immigrant experience, and the Filipino American experience as revealed in literature. The discussions in this field were rich, stimulating and varied; among other things, the presentations showcased the wealth of research on Filipino Americans being done in the University of Hawaii.

Supportive of the above discussions were papers which analyzed conditions in the Philippines relevant to the migration phenomenon. A panel on "Ilokanos and Migration" discussed objective and subjective conditions in a Philippine region which is a leading

source area of migrants to the United States. Also relevant were panels which attempted to sketch in (though not necessarily in a direct, purposive fashion) various parts of the social backdrop to emigration.

In a panel on "Social, Economic and Political Conditions in Philippine Villages," a group of young scholars — Rochelle A. McArthur (East-West Center), Antonio J. Ledesma (Xavier University), Temario C. Rivera (University of the Philippines), and Robert Y. Siy, Jr. (Cornell University) — discussed the results of community studies on agrarian reform, export-crop production, and peasant response to government programs and technological innovation. In another panel ("The Alternative to Filipino Emigration: Life on the Late 19th and 20th Century Frontier"), Ronald K. Edgerton (University of Northern Colorado) and William E. James (Asian Development Bank) discussed the process and problems of pioneer settlement in Bukidnon and Palawan, respectively.

Spillover papers (the expression is not intended to be a judgment of merit; some of the papers drew from solid research and acute analysis) ranged through a dizzying mix of topics: mythic patterns in Filipino behavior, aid rejection among Philippine negritos, a comparison of taxation systems in Spanish Philippines and Dutch Indonesia, and spirit possession cults in Metro Manila. In addition, there were special panels on Philippine languages and the development of linguistic theory in the Philippines, trends in health and medicine in the Philippines, the state of the Philippine arts, and the status of the Filipino Woman.

Martial rule in the Philippines, of course, is a subject that had to be discussed. Two regular panel discussions were addressed to the subject: one on "Institutions Under Martial Law," which assessed the performance of Philippine cooperatives and of legislative and judicial bodies in the 1970s; another on "New Society: Conceptual Approaches," which analyzed the ideological and bureaucratic dimensions of the "New Society." These panels, in addition to other individual papers in the conference, presented, in sum, a cool, well-reasoned assessment of the aims and performance of the Philippine "crisis" government. The papers produced by these panels deserve wider circulation and publication as a separate volume for being a studious and provocative analysis of a current and complex phenomenon.

LOOKING FORWARD

There was unanimous praise for the management of the conference itself. Credit goes to chairperson Belinda A. Aquino (head of the UH Philippine Studies Program) and the people of the Center for Asian & Pacific Studies and the other cooperating departments of UH. The accommodations were superb — the sessions efficiently run. The off-session activities (which included a regular barrio fiesta tendered by the Filipinos of the Waialua Sugar Plantation and memorable after-dinner speeches by leading Filipinos in Hawaii, State Supreme Court Justice Benjamin Menor and State Senator Ben Cayetano) were meaningful and pleasant.

Ronald K. Edgerton, who is the executive secretary of the AAS Philippine Studies Committee, was led to remark: "This is a superb and elegant conference — like a grand ball compared to the square dance at Kalamazoo last year." Many felt it was a conference difficult to match. In other ways, perhaps, the Honolulu Conference may also be climactic.

The extravagance of papers at the conference is itself reflective of the dramatic growth of Philippine Studies in the United States and the Philippines — and in other countries as well, notably Australia. In the United States, this growth is tied to the marked expansion of higher education in the 1960s and 1970s, an expansion which saw the rise of area studies centers as well as of innovative and aggressive research and study programs.

There is, however, a sobering note in the fact that this phenomenon, particularly in the U.S., is levelling off in the 1980s. Inflation, widespread retrenchment, and policy changes at various levels are even now cutting into public and private subsidies for scholarship and research in the arts, humanities, and social sciences. Depression in the academic job market, a slowdown of postgraduate enrollments, and the insecure status of area studies programs in American universities point to the passing away of what was, in many ways, a decade of exuberant activity in research and scholarship in the United States. (In one of the actions taken by the Honolulu Conference, the participants unanimously passed a resolution urging the University of Hawaii administration to grant permanent status to the university's Philippine Studies Program, which is currently under review.)

This is not to say that research in the coming decade will be less significant. Sound scholarship will continue to be done even under adverse conditions. We expect, however, two things to happen: a more studious allocation of research resources, and a more pronounced shift in the center of gravity in Philippine Studies from the United States to the Philippines.

In recognition of the sober realities of a diminished infrastructure for research, the participants in Honolulu decided to make the Philippine Studies Conference a quadrennial instead of annual affair. It remains to be seen where the 1984 conference will take place although Manila looms as the most likely venue. In Manila in 1984, it should be interesting to reflect once more on the state and directions of Philippine Studies.