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## Philippines: Bridge to Southeast Asia

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# Philippines: Bridge to Southeast Asia

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FRANK LYNCH

**T**he Philippines is often referred to as a showcase of democracy in the Far East. Less frequently it is called a bridge to southeast Asia, and it is this latter figure that interests me here. For I wonder in what sense a nation may be a bridge to a region. More particularly, if I were a Westerner coming to the Philippines for the first time, how might the Philippines and its people lead me to southeast Asia?

An acceptable answer to this question requires a preliminary review of some of the more important things we know about the pre-Spanish Philippines, and about contemporary cultural similarities between the peoples of the Philippines and other southeast Asians. For it seems reasonable that unless we can determine to what extent the Filipinos and their southern neighbors share a common past and a single way of life, we will not know with what assurance we may expect the Philippines to link the West with southeast Asia.

## PRE-SPANISH PHILIPPINES

In the papers which preceded mine in this *Philippine Perspective* series, the authors presented a carefully selected sample of the archeological, linguistic, and historical evidence on which our present understanding of the pre-Spanish Philippines is based. What emerges from that evidence, viewed in broadest

outline, is the conclusion that the Philippines before Magellan was, first of all, marginal to mainland and insular southeast Asia. Also clear is the fact that it was a fragmented archipelago possessed of a latent unity. Finally, it reacted to outside influences, not in passive fashion, but creatively. I will enlarge on each of these points in turn.

First, the Philippines was *marginal* in both the geographical and social sense of the term. Geographically the Philippines has always been an outlier, far removed from mainland Asia and joined with it only intermittently by Pleistocene land-bridges. From the social viewpoint, the Philippines was ever at the other end of a long and difficult migration route by land and sea. Even during the centuries of Sri-Vijaya and Madjapahit ascendancy, from the 7th to 16th centuries, the Philippines was untouched by any imperial outreach. When Islam entered the Philippines, it came in the person of merchants, not conquering warriors (Majul 1962). Finally, despite her busy trade with the people of these islands, China never made of them an extension of her mainland population.

Because of this marginality, the Philippines remained aloof and apart from the great civilizations of Asia. Until the day when Spain appeared, the Philippines was uncommitted to any great ideology or sphere of influence. It had taken no sides, thrown in its lot with no one. It had never been invited.

Second, the Philippines was *fragmented*. The picture drawn for us by students of prehistory and linguistics is that of a shattered archipelago inhabited by small groups of people who lived in settlements socially isolated, by and large, from all but their nearest neighbors. Nestled in coves and bays, at river mouths and in river valleys, speaking different tongues and owing allegiance to none but local leaders, the pre-Spanish Filipinos were like dwellers in a vast and scattered housing development, each aware only of the doings in his own small home, apparently caring little and knowing less about those around him. The only exception was found in parts of Mindanao and Sulu, where Islam had established contact and intercommunication by means of the sultanate.

Third, the Philippines had nonetheless a *latent unity*. Despite the absence of a formal unity the various peoples of the Philippines were in many ways alike. The findings of archeology, linguistics, and ethnohistory make it clear that in language, religion, political system, family and kinship, stratification, economy, and material goods, the isolated communities of the archipelago were closely similar. To return to the analogy of the housing development, it was as if almost every household was kin to every other, but without an awareness of their common bond. What was lacking to turn this latent unity into conscious oneness was wider communication and over-arching leadership.

Fourth, the Philippines was *receptive*—open to outside influences, visitors, and immigrants. This fact is clear from the archeological and linguistic record, which bears mute but eloquent witness to the eagerness of the Filipino peoples to profit from what their neighbors and visitors could bring them. Trade goods, linguistic borrowings, racial strains, and plants became a part of the local cultures, societies, and environment with little or no resistance to impede their entrance.<sup>1</sup>

Fifth, the Philippines was *creative*. The process was not one merely of acceptance; it was followed by the active adaptation of innovations to pre-existent patterns of life. We have ample indication of the ways in which cultural traits of foreign origin were not only adopted but modified and Filipinized. Here I think especially of Philippine ceramics and languages, but one could easily add the Indic syllabary, the datu system, and other social, political, and economic patterns.

Now let me return to the point of departure. Our reason for reviewing these broad conclusions about the pre-Spanish Philippines was to give us some idea of the extent to which the Philippines of those days was like the rest of southeast Asia. It seems we have raised a problem. For while the fragmented unity and creative receptivity of the Philippines before Magellan says little for or against the claim that the

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<sup>1</sup> This fact is dramatically demonstrated by the Philippine flora, which is genus poor and species rich. See Lynch 1963.

Philippines is a bridge to southeast Asia, the apparent marginality of the archipelago seems to contradict that claim. How can we reconcile the Philippines' marginality, as described above, with an origin and culture supposedly shared with southeast Asia?

In two ways, I believe: first, by understanding that the kind of disconnection the Philippines had from its southern neighbors by no means precluded mutual close cultural ties; second, by looking briefly at the similarities which make the Philippines one with southeast Asia today.

The pre-Spanish Philippines was, as we said, relatively untouched by the Madjapahit and Sri-Vijaya empires and by the great traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. Islam did make its presence felt beginning at the close of the 14th century, but it came as a merchant's sideline, and its influence, pervasive as it was, met in the incoming Spaniards a counterforce that contained it.

Nonetheless, and this is the crucial point, to say that the great traditions of south and southeast Asia were weakly present in the archipelago, if at all, is not to deny that the ordinary folkways and common customs of the region had entered the Philippines in force from the south. For the process by which this little tradition spreads and flourishes is far different from that by which a great tradition is diffused.

To begin with, literacy in a sacred language is supposed for the orthodox transmission of the great traditions. There must be holy men to carry the word, full-time or part-time specialists—bonzes, monks, priests, or imams. The little tradition needs no such support. It travels far and fast by word of ordinary, unconsecrated mouth. Again, where the great traditions tend to find their tangible, material expression, or localization, in temples, mosques, and churches, the little tradition is relatively site-free. It comes to a point in a domestic image half-hidden in a home, in a seasonal ceremony that transforms an otherwise quite ordinary grove or field, or in a rite that grants to some private residence a measure of transitory holiness. This little tradition, along with all the cultural

props that accompany and support it, spreads from place to place as the undeclared baggage of average travelers completely unaware of the role they play.

In recent millennia the common man of southeast Asia could easily have moved from cove to sheltering cove even more safely and swiftly than once he went, in Pleistocene times, from cave to cave. Out of the south he could have come, following the coastline of an island now called Borneo, across the unintimidating straits and on into the outliers to the north and northeast, Palawan and Sulu. Travelers such as this, ordinary farmers, fishermen, and craftsmen of southeast Asia, could have brought with them the makings of much of the little tradition now found in the Philippines, the basic culture Filipinos share with their cousins to the south. Hence though the Philippines was largely outside the pale of the great traditions, this fact alone need not have prevented its most widespread way of life from being at base the common culture of southeast Asia extended northward.

We can go even further. We can show how much alike the two cultures are today. A sampling of similarities will illustrate the point.

#### THE PHILIPPINES AND SOUTHEAST ASIA TODAY

The bamboo, the coconut, and the rice plant play cardinal roles in southeast Asia, just as they do in the lowland Philippines. And in both places the water buffalo, or carabao, has a helping role to play. Both irrigated and swidden (*kain-gin*) agriculture are practiced in ways that farmers north or south of Sulu would recognize as their own or something close to it.

The same can be said, by and large, of river or off-shore fishing, as well as hunting. House building and many household activities like weaving and food preparation are also markedly similar.

The ordinary diet consists mainly of a starchy staple—rice or some tuber—plus something to go with it, be it a little fish, a little vegetable, a little meat, a banana. The use of

*patis* and *bagoong* (fish paste) is also shared. Like the low-land Filipinos, most people of southeast Asia know what it is to go through the season of scarcity each year, the three months or so between the time when last year's staple crop was consumed and next year's crop planted but not harvested. Like most Filipino tenants on small holdings, the tenant of southeast Asia raises more rice per hectare than do those who own and operate plots of similar size.

With very few exceptions, the kinship structure that gives form to certain aspects of social life is bilateral, just as it is in all the Philippines. Marriages of ordinary people tend, moreover, to be locally and socially endogamous. People usually choose spouses from the same settlement or from close by, unless the requirements of class endogamy (marrying "their own kind") make them look elsewhere.

The Philippines and southeast Asia also share a related trait, that of "marriage politics" (as Goethals [1959] calls it). This is patterned bargaining to reach agreement on those conditions of betrothal and marriage best suited to ensure and enhance the social stature of the bride. The bride must never marry down, they say, and so the groom must at least *seem* to be her equal. This cultural rule for match-making reflects in part the fact that in all of southeast Asia and the Philippines the traditional position of women is relatively high.

Another characteristic common to the two cultures is the centrality of the I-thou relation, the dyad. This relation is the building block, in turn, of another social structural unit of primary importance in both the Philippines and southeast Asia, namely, what I call the ego-centered alliance group. This is the group of people that an individual can really rely on at any one period in his lifetime. Some members are transient, others (such as parents, siblings, and children) belong more permanently to the alliance group. But for the duration of their membership all are bound to the central person by special ties of loyalty. Each, in this turn, is the center of another such group, whose roster is partly the same and partly different from the first. Groups of this kind seem to be especially

important where people reckon descent with no special preference for the father's or the mother's side and where, in effect, the most important social units in a man's life are the members of his immediate family or household, and his friends, whether kinsmen or not.

From social structure, we easily stumble over into the realm of values, a tangled underfoot of likelihoods. At least insofar as preliminary scouting north and south of Sulu leads us to believe, this aspect of lowland Philippine culture is in many ways similar to what is found in the rest of southeast Asia. People above and below the Sulu archipelago tend to be similarly keen about social acceptance, preserving and increasing it by dealing pleasantly with the pleasant, on the one hand, and being powder-keg sensitive to insult, on the other. Expectations of ingroup solidarity are also much the same in both regions. So is the way in which, looked at from outside the group, one member is equated with any other when gratitude, obligation, or vengeance is the issue. Again, both the average Filipino and his southern neighbors take a more personalistic than mechanistic view of the universe and, in particular, of the route to economic security and material well-being.

The Philippines and southeast Asia do, then, share many cultural traits and a common cultural heritage. Given this relation, it follows that the Philippines can in some way lead or link the West to southeast Asia. But how? How does the average Filipino link the American, for instance, to southeast Asia? What kind of bridge can he be?

#### THE PHILIPPINES AS BRIDGE

When we use the term "bridge" in this context, we generally imply that to associate with or understand the people of one nation or territory is to understand the people of another. But this can occur in a variety of ways. We will examine some of them.

The people of Honolulu are sometimes seen as an East-West bridge joining Asians to mainland America and the West.

When Japanese students, for instance, arrive at the University of Hawaii, they see around them thousands of people who look somewhat like themselves, can speak some Japanese, understand many homeland customs, but are in other ways very different indeed. Chinese and Filipinos have the same experience. In these cases the Asian is introduced to American culture through a middleman who participates in both cultures.

The degree to which these middlemen take part in the two cultures can vary greatly, of course, and the Asian learns little or much about America depending on how typically American the middleman is. If he has spent most of his years in the shelter of some Japanese cultural inlet, the middleman may be in this regard no more useful than an expatriate American living in Paris on the fringes of French society, understanding of that society only those few formulas and procedures he needs to support his way of life. On the other hand, the Honolulu Japanese-American may be so completely in the mainstream of American culture that the only similarities between himself and the visiting Japanese will be physical appearance and some shared expressions, in basic Japanese on the one side and basic English on the other.

But notice that what makes the middleman what he is is the fact that, to some degree at least, he participates in both American and Japanese culture. The Japanese-American, part-Japanese as he is, is also an American, and so he can lead the visiting Japanese to a knowledge of America through himself. When the visitor meets a Japanese-American, he meets another Japanese—and an American. The Manila Filipino, however, is neither Malaysian, nor Indonesian, nor Vietnamese, nor Thai. When the Westerner meets a Filipino, he meets a Filipino. Period. In other words, the Honolulu Japanese-American plays one kind of bridge and the Filipino quite another. We must look elsewhere than Honolulu for a parallel.

I think first of the kind of bridge the Nahuatl Indians once were for me. They helped me understand the Otomi. I was living at that time in a place called Santiago Tianguis-

tenco, in the Lerma Valley, some 35 miles southwest of Mexico City. My dealings were primarily with the people of Tianguis-tenco and its satellite villages—all inhabited by Nahuatl, or Aztec, Indians. After I had been in the area for about 10 months I met some Otomi Indians who had come in from the mountainous country south and east of the Lerma Valley, in the direction of Tepoztlan and Cuernavaca. The Otomi speak a language distinct from Nahuatl, but it was my impression that having first known the Nahuatl made the Otomi more understandable, or at least much less mysterious than they might otherwise have seemed.

Another example comes to mind: the Spaniard as bridge to the Portuguese (or vice versa, for that matter). Regardless of how each may deny it, they are very similar in many ways. Though the languages are distinct, for instance, it is nonetheless a standard joke for the Spaniard to call Portuguese bad Spanish, and for the Portuguese to return the compliment. Because of their common origins, and the primordial ties that bind them, the Spaniard and the Portuguese are in many ways one. In effect, if you scratch either one, an Iberian bleeds.

In the Spaniard as bridge to the Portuguese we have, I believe, a model for the Filipino-southeast Asian relation more suitable than that provided by the Nahuatl-Otomi pair. For one thing, the Nahuatl and Otomi languages are far more different from each other than Spanish is from Portuguese or Tagalog, for example, from Javanese or Malay. Again, language aside, other cultural similarities seem to join Portuguese and Spaniard about as closely as they do the Filipino and his southeast Asian neighbors.

What makes the parallel especially appropriate, in my estimation, is the similar manner in which the members of each pair are often reluctant to admit that it exists. I may be mistaken in this, and here my Filipino colleagues must set me right, but let me pursue the point for what it may be worth. Just as many Spaniards tend to protest their uniqueness too much, apparently forgetting all they share with the Portuguese,

so the educated Filipino at times appears to over-estimate his own Westernness. He seems to believe what he is told about his having a non-culture, a mixed bag of odd parts from the Malay, Spanish, and American ways of life; he reproaches himself for having abandoned an Oriental heritage which is in fact very much a part of him.

Like it or not (and he tends to like it these days), the Filipino is a bridge to southeast Asia. For as in the social world of the great Philippine cities, so in the watery ocean world there are all kinds of creatures adept at survival and growth. Swift and sure as the rest in this medium, the dolphin competes on equal terms with them all. But when it comes to the privately intimate things in life, like breathing and having babies, the dolphin is not a fish after all, but a whale, a mammal. Down deep, where he lives, the Filipino, like the dolphin, knows who he is.

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