

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

Neocolonialism and Peace Corps Teaching in the Philippines

Jeffrey Ayala Milligan

Philippine Studies vol. 48, no. 1 (2000): 109–120

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>
Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

Neocolonialism and Peace Corps Teaching in the Philippines

Jeffrey Ayala Milligan

Teaching has long been seen as simultaneously a practical and a fundamentally moral enterprise (Dewey 1909, 2). It assumes that the conditions of individual human existence can be improved by equipping individuals with the intellectual tools necessary to make their lives better and, perhaps, to improve the lives of others as well. Thus the good that teaching is supposed to effect reaches beyond the individual to the society he or she inhabits. It assumes further that because teaching can improve the lives of those taught, it should. Therefore, it then sets for itself the practical task of enacting positive changes in the lives of students and through them the life of their society. Those who teach, whether they feel "called" or simply fall into the profession, recognize this moral imperative at some level and endeavor to respond to it in a meaningful fashion.

Often educators see this moral imperative as extending beyond one's immediate circle of family, community, or culture to the poor and oppressed of other races and cultures. Advocates for the education of women, African Americans, Native Americans, and others have justified their causes in terms of this moral imperative to alleviate poverty and oppression through teaching by equipping the poor with the tools necessary to improve their lot in life (Cooper 1988; DuBois 1969; Beecher 1981). With these good intentions, teachers have long been inspired to leave their homes to teach the poor and oppressed in other countries. The United States' colonization of the Philippines at the beginning of this century, for instance, was justified as an opportunity to fill the country with "schoolhouses and missionaries" (Karnow 1989, 109). And President McKinley asserted that it was the United States' moral responsibility to "educate the Filipinos, and uplift and Christian-

ize them, and by God's grace do the very best we could by them, as our fellow men for whom Christ died" (Karnow 1989, 128).

Since the end of the colonial era, however, educational theory has seriously undermined these pious intentions by revealing how this moral imperative in teaching serves as a cover for economic, political, cultural, and religious hegemony. Fanon (1967) and Freire (1990), for instance, have shown how teaching has been and can be used to serve the interests of the powerful rather than the powerless. Said (1979), Code (1991) and others have shown how the construction of the very discipline and knowledge taught in schools has built in biases that serve to perpetuate the dominance of those with power over those with less power. In the specific context of the Philippines, Constantino (1978) has shown how American and Americanized education has served to create and maintain a neocolonial identity among Filipinos that benefits the United States.

This moral imperative implicit in teaching is further undermined by postmodern theories about the nature of the subject as a contingent, inevitably interested position created by social discourses (Foucault 1990). The individual is a product rather than a producer of social discourse so the possibility of effective human agency is undermined (West 1989, 223–25). The individual is a "fragmented, individualistic, and particularistic self" apparently unable to escape from its necessarily subjective positionality to participate in the shared moral value that provides a foundation for social change (Roman 1993). Thus postmodernism challenges the very ground upon which this moral imperative in teaching rests.

In spite of these challenges, however, the sense of a moral imperative in teaching is common among educators and a powerful motivation for teaching domestically and internationally. A status quo marred by racism, sexism, homophobia, political and economic neocolonialism, oppression, violence and a host of other ills cannot go unchallenged. Therefore, a major challenge for international teaching is to struggle for, in the words of Cornel West (1989, 235), a "culture of creative democracy in which the plight of the wretched of the earth is alleviated." Yet this must be done in the light of postmodernism's and postcolonial theory's insights into the selfish and oppressive practices into which such efforts have so often fallen. The question for such international teaching becomes, then, how to extricate the good intention to contribute to the improvement of others' lives without making the mistakes which postmodernism and postcolonial theory maps.

While this article proposes no definitive answer to that question, it will attempt to contribute to the search for an answer by reflecting on an instance of international teaching motivated by the best of intentions but which ultimately failed to realize them. Specifically, it will analyze the experience of a group of U.S. Peace Corps volunteer teachers in the southern Philippines in order to understand how and where their good intentions ran aground. It will then reflect upon what that experience might have to teach others who would attempt to teach across racial, ethnic, religious, and political borders in response to the moral imperative of their profession to improve the lives of others through education.

Peace Corps Teachers in the Southern Philippines

This moral imperative to alleviate the plight of the "wretched of the earth" has long been an explicit mandate of the U.S. Peace Corps. Since its inception in the early 1960s, the Peace Corps has enacted this mandate through teaching. In fact, education projects constitute one of the main thrusts of Peace Corps' international development efforts. Few countries have a longer experience with such educational assistance than the Philippines, where Peace Corps teachers and teacher-trainers have been at work almost continuously since 1961. This article focuses on one of those projects in which the author and four other American volunteers participated.

By the mid-1980s Mindanao State University, established in 1961 to provide improved educational opportunities for Muslim youth in the southern Philippines, had come to the conclusion that they were not adequately fulfilling that mandate. The university's graduation rates for Maranao students—the largest Muslim ethnolinguistic group in the area—were disappointing. After careful study, the administration of the university concluded that the Maranao students' deficiencies in English, the medium of instruction in the university, was the primary cause of their limited success in the university. Construing the problem as a consequence of poor instruction and curricula in the provincial high schools, university officials asked the U.S. Peace Corps for assistance in teacher training and curriculum development (M.S.U. Proposal 1984).

In early 1985 the Peace Corps responded to the university's request with five American volunteers. We volunteers were charged with the task of training provincial high school teachers and developing cur-

ricula in order to improve Maranao students' chances of success at the university and in their later lives. With these good intentions, we went to work in a politically charged environment wracked by tensions between Muslim and non-Muslim Filipinos, between a right wing American-backed government and leftist opponents, and between rich and poor (George 1980; Karnow 1989). At the same time, we stepped into an historical milieu characterized by a long and continuing struggle against external and internal colonization. In this almost century-long struggle the Maranao had successfully resisted Spanish domination, fought and finally lost to American imperialism, and were then resisting what many Maranao saw as a kind of domestic colonization by the non-Muslim Filipino majority (Saber 1979; Gowing 1983; Bauzon 1991). Throughout these struggles, education played a significant role (Gates 1973; Gowing 1983).

Within a year the project had collapsed. Though the ostensible reason for withdrawing us from Mindanao was the response of local Muslims to the U.S. bombing raid on Tripoli, Libya, the project had in fact never really gotten off the ground. It collapsed, in fact, for a variety of reasons. These included political issues, our limited knowledge of local culture and conditions, the university's lack of resources, and a host of other obstacles beyond anyone's control. However, even without these problems, it became clear, in retrospect, that the project had already foundered on unarticulated, unexamined, and therefore unmapped cultural and philosophical differences that doomed this well-intentioned attempt to teach across cultural, political, and religious borders in order to alleviate the plight of the poor and oppressed. What were these differences? What were their consequences? How might it be possible to avoid them? These are the questions this article is intended to address.

Cultural Mistakes in International Teaching

In order to address these questions, I conducted intensive interviews with each of my colleagues and two other volunteers about their experience approximately ten years after their Peace Corps service at Mindanao State University. I asked them to reflect on that experience, its successes and failures as they perceived them, the reasons for that success or failure, and their perception of the people and culture of the area as it pertained to their project. Though the insights into teaching across international borders gleaned from their accounts is partial at

best—it is not balanced here by the stories of the Maranao teachers and students with whom they were involved—their stories nevertheless offer important clues to the nature and location of some of the mistakes that undermine international teaching as a response to the moral imperative to alleviate the plight of the oppressed. Emergent themes in the interviews identified four such mistakes imbedded in our responses to the challenge of international teaching.

The first of these mistakes occurred in the processes whereby we constructed our images of ourselves and the Maranao. Pratt (1992) has shown how individuals traveling in other cultures often interpret their experiences within a framework of existing discourses that shape how the individual sees himself, his experience, and the local culture. My fellow volunteers' comments in their interviews suggested that we entered Peace Corps service with a self-image to which that service contributed. Most described their motivation for joining in terms of interests in travel, adventure, learning about other cultures, as well as a desire to gain professionally relevant experience and help others. In describing herself and other volunteers, one individual drew on the image of the rugged individual from nineteenth century American literature (Ruland and Bradbury 1991). They were "pioneers" and "explorers" who could survive even in the "backwoods of Papua New Guinea." Her language suggested a self-image of the individual, active, adventurous discoverer bringing something that was missing to "the back woods." As Memmi (1965) has shown, the construction of such a self-image clearly implies a very different image of the "Other" as somehow deficient in itself. Thus it differed in subtle but important ways from the recognition of their material poverty and political oppression implicit in the moral imperative discussed above.

Though we arrived in the southern Philippines with a fairly clear image of ourselves, we had no knowledge of the Maranao people with whom we would work. However, the self-image some of us had constructed out of a network of nineteenth century literary discourses had a well-prepared framework for constructing the "Other," a framework filled in by the experts to whom we turned for information on the Maranao. Though our limited language instruction had depended on Maranao informants, our knowledge of the Maranao and Islam was drawn primarily from foreign sources: books, other volunteers, and Christian missionaries with years of experience in the region. Those volunteers who claimed to have learned the most about the Maranao and Islam said they acquired their information from an Irish priest, a

former American missionary teaching at the university, an active American missionary teaching in a local Christian college, and the European head of that school whose credibility was verified by his having published two books on the Maranao.

While there was much useful information to be acquired from these sources, they tended to deploy, and we quickly adopted, a cultural geography expressed in American-Filipino, Christian-Muslim dichotomies. Said (1979) refers to this practice as "exteriority," a process of constructing the "Other" in ways that imply a hierarchical relationship in spite of expressions of belief in the equality of cultures. Indeed, the volunteers' statements asserting some kind of equality between Maranao and U.S. culture often followed particularly negative descriptions of the Maranao as "feudal," "corrupt," "difficult," "closed," etc. Thus relativistic comments about the worth of both cultures seemed to serve as a mechanism for preserving the rhetoric of cultural equality and obscuring an implicit hierarchy in which the second term in these dichotomies was seen in less positive terms than the first.

While the moral imperative to alleviate the plight of the "wretched of the earth" clearly assumes a dichotomy between those who can help and those who need help, the process of "exteriority" we deployed implied the presence of a moral, cultural, or intellectual, as well as a material, deficiency among the people we hoped to help. We, in effect, placed ourselves in an epistemic "fishbowl" whereby "knowledge" about the right half of the dichotomy—the outside of the fishbowl—was acquired and exchanged from within the fishbowl—the left half of the dichotomy. Therefore, getting out of the fishbowl to acquire knowledge directly from the "Other" was hampered not only by cultural, linguistic, and political barriers, it was hampered by the structure of the very discourses within which we had constructed our selves and the "Other." Thus the cultural maps we used and constructed to orient ourselves and our response to the moral imperative to help others helped insure our unwitting participation in a process of internal colonization and cultural imperialism.

A second mistake revealed in the volunteers' reflection on their experience was our ignorance of education's—particularly English education's—long history in the Philippines as a tool of colonial domination, a domination Muslim Filipinos of Mindanao have resisted for centuries (Saber 1979). After successfully resisting Spanish imperialism, the Maranao were finally brought under the authority of a Manila government by a devastating military campaign and a U.S. military

occupation that lasted until 1920 (Gowing 1983). During this time education in English became an important tool in the pacification campaign of the U.S. colonial regime (Gates 1973; Karnow 1989, 200–209). Even after Philippine independence, education continued to be used as a tool for the assimilation of cultural minorities, particularly in Mindanao.

It was in this environment that the Philippine government, with the assistance of the Ford Foundation and the U.S. Peace Corps, established Mindanao State University in the early 1960's. Located in the Maranao dominated province of Lanao del Sur, its purpose was to offer higher education opportunities to Muslim Filipinos and to foster their integration into the mainstream of Philippine society. Like other Philippine universities, English was and is the medium of instruction for much of the curriculum. By the early 1980's, however, a bloody civil war for the independence of Muslim Mindanao, heightened the Philippine government's concern for Muslim Filipino education and integration into the larger Philippine body politic (George 1980). Thus the Peace Corps project reflected upon here fit within a long history of external and internal colonization through education.

Though there were clearly ulterior motives behind this expansion of education in English, it was also motivated to a significant extent by a genuine desire to do good. Education was and is seen as a good in the Philippines and among the Maranao. For the Peace Corps volunteers at Mindanao State University in the mid-1980s, Maranao students' lack of facility in English was one obvious obstacle to their access to that good; we therefore, saw helping them improve their English language skills as a meaningful response to the moral imperative to alleviate the plight of the poor and oppressed. We did not interrogate the cultural or political consequences of English instruction for the Maranao because we had no cultural or political intent in teaching the language. In accepting and using—even in my colleagues' interviews ten years later—the American/Filipino and especially Christian/Muslim dichotomies, we assumed we were making an educationally relevant distinction which accurately identified who was and was not in need of assistance in improving their proficiency in English. We did not entertain the possibility that this distinction may have in fact identified a political target for cultural assimilation-colonization and that our project may have contributed to that process. But in fact, a deliberate aim of such teaching—explicitly recognized in the early days of the U.S. colonial regime (Karnow 1989, 200–209)—was to

reorient the Maranao toward Manila and the West and thus counteract the influence of the Maranao language, Arabic and Islam, all of which oriented the Maranao toward their own cultural and religious traditions and the Islamic world.

Curricular decisions constituted a third mistake that contributed to this process of internal colonization through education. With only a couple of exceptions, we had little or no teaching experience. Our inexperience, combined with our lack of knowledge about the educational culture and needs of the Maranao, created a circumstance in which we turned to our own curricular experiences to determine the content of our classes for Maranao students. Those volunteers who could remember specific course content recalled teaching primarily European and American texts. Very little Filipino literature and no Maranao or Islamic literature was taught. Though we recognized the value—indeed the necessity—of including such texts in our courses, they were either simply not available or we were not familiar with them. This was not an unusual state of affairs throughout the university. Many Filipino teachers made the same decisions. Thus the route to education and socio-economic status for Maranao students lay through an alien language and a largely alien culture.

To a significant extent, then, the education offered Maranao students presented them with a choice between assimilation into the dominant, Western-oriented culture or continued marginalization if they refused the “help” given to them by the Philippine government and the U.S. Peace Corps. Since this education was seen as good—a legitimate response to the moral imperative to alleviate the plight of the “wretched of the earth”—the continued lack of academic success of many Maranao students’ could only be seen as a failure on our part as teachers or an individual or cultural failure of the Maranao. We did not entertain the possibility that that failure may have constituted a form of resistance to cultural imperialism.

The volunteers’ reflection on their international teaching experience revealed a fourth mistake in our failure to understand how our cultural value of individualism could prevent us from recognizing the real potential for neocolonial outcomes from our activities. While this lack of insight was due in large measure to our own ignorance and to the understandable confusion resulting from an encounter with a very different culture in an intensely charged political atmosphere, unexamined cultural values contributed to this blindness. Perhaps the most significant of these was our sense of individuality, for it affected

what we were able to see in our activities by enabling us to distinguish ourselves as individuals from the actions of the Philippine and U.S. governments and the Peace Corps even as we participated in those actions. Holding to the belief that we, as individuals, were not political, we could believe that our activities were not historical since we did not see their complicity in the history of colonial and neocolonial education in the Philippines.

Though one of Peace Corps' explicit goals is to share American culture via the experience of living and working with an American volunteer, we interpreted that aspect of our presence in individualistic terms. Our presence gave Filipinos and the Maranao an opportunity to experience what Americans were "really like" as opposed to the images they may have gotten from U.S. popular culture or their impressions of U.S. government policies in the Philippines. Thus we saw ourselves paradoxically as representatives and non-representatives of the U.S. We accomplished this by distinguishing ourselves as individuals and the values and qualities we saw in ourselves and others like us from the corporate actions of the U.S. government or the Peace Corps. Therefore, we were quite willing and able to criticize the activities of the U.S. government and its agencies like the Peace Corps, but we were less able and willing to recognize any personal complicity in those actions. We were individuals distinct from our government, and it was not our intent to promote cultural imperialism or a neocolonial relationship with the U.S.

In the politically charged atmosphere of 1985-86, however, many Filipinos saw us as Americans, as conscious agents of a government and culture with a long and continuing oppressive relationship with the Philippines. We saw ourselves as individuals outside that history and thus not complicit in it. Therefore, our construction of the meaning of our presence from our own subject positions took precedence over the meaning constructed by Filipinos critical of our presence in Lanao. We understood our presence correctly. They were simply misinformed because of the limitations of their own locations: they did not have the same international and educational experiences that we had. Thus we exercised, at the individual level, an epistemic hegemony that, while perfectly willing to participate in radical critique of U.S. government institutions and policies, interpreted equivalent critique of ourselves and our actions as misinformed provincialism. Thus, by claiming our nonpolitical and nonhistorical individuality, we were able to assert our own good intentions and justify our presence in Lanao

while declining responsibility for the actions or intentions of the organizations that put us there and gave us our assignments.

Avoiding these Mistakes in International Teaching

My fellow volunteers were uniformly frank about their motivations for joining Peace Corps. They were motivated first by self-interest: they wanted to travel and experience another culture, gain professional experience, defer career choices, etc. But while self-interest appeared to be their primary reason for entering Peace Corps, they did articulate a genuine willingness to face real challenges and discomforts in order to be of service to the poor in the Philippines. In extended interviews they never articulated any overt desire to spread American cultural, political, or economic influence in the Philippines. In fact, all of the volunteers were hostile to the notion of serving as secular missionaries of U.S. society. They were genuinely decent, intelligent, thoughtful people responding to the moral imperative to "alleviate the plight of the wretched of the earth" through education. Our experience, then, raises at least two questions: Is it possible to rescue such good intentions from the overt and covert neocolonial consequences of governments? If so, how?

I will assume an affirmative answer to the first of these questions, for to do otherwise suggests that the moral imperative in teaching discussed above is baseless, that a kind of imperialistic imposition is inherent in teaching. If this is so, we are confronted with the choice of resisting the urge to "alleviate the plight of the wretched of the earth" in order to avoid cultural imperialism or embracing cultural imperialism on the grounds that it is "for their own good." Neither is a morally attractive option. So, if we assume an affirmative answer to the first question, how do we answer the second? The experience of Peace Corps teachers reflected upon in this inquiry suggests some tentative answers.

Conclusion

Our experience exposes, for instance, the lie of nonhistorical, non-political individualism so commonly used to insulate Americans' involvement overseas from criticism. Peace Corps, for instance, was and is quite careful to deny any political intentions in its development ac-

tivities and to train its volunteers to avoid any activity that might politicize their presence. The purpose of this is, of course, to avoid the perception of unwarranted political interference in the affairs of another culture. However, the effect of such a policy is to hide the neo-colonial political interference that is often taking place behind the mask of the well-intentioned teacher who eschews political interests as he or she responds to a perceived moral imperative to help the poor through education. Furthermore, it ignores the fact that responding to this moral imperative may in itself constitute a political intervention in solidarity with the poor and oppressed against the political and economic elites of both the U.S. and local governments. Postmodern and postcolonial theory both show that we are inextricably enmeshed in historical-political discursive webs that have real consequences for the poor (Said 1979; Freire 1990; Foucault 1991). We can choose to ignore this fact, but we cannot escape it.

This fact suggests, paradoxically, that preparation to teach across international boundaries of culture, class, and religion in the service of a moral imperative to improve the lot of the poor requires first and foremost an understanding of one's own cultural location. It also requires historical awareness of the discursive relationship between that location and others and how that has perpetuate unequal power relationships that serve the interests of one position over the other. For international teaching in particular, it requires an understanding of how education has served as a tool in that process. In this way the teacher who understands how the moral imperative in teaching has been used to further neocolonial interests in the past is better able to subvert such misuse of his good intentions in the present. Armed with this knowledge the teacher is better able to understand the contemporary political context of his teaching and the political consequences of his pedagogical decisions.

Thus it is ineffective to eschew the political and historical as a means of avoiding conflict in order to act on the moral imperative to alleviate the plight of West's (1989) "wretched of the earth." Rather, the Peace Corps experience reflected upon here suggests that international teaching that responds to this moral imperative must first be historicized and politicized. While this only begins the difficult task of forging genuinely communal and mutually educative relationships with those served and making pedagogical decisions that reflect and sustain such relationships, it at least maps some of the obstacles to such efforts.

References

- Bauzon, Kenneth. 1991. *Liberalism and the quest for Islamic identity in the Philippines*. Durham, N.C.: Acorn Press.
- Beecher, Catherine. 1835/1981. Essay on the education of female teachers. In *Classics in the education of girls and women*, ed. Shirley Nelson Kersey. Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press.
- Code, Lorraine. 1991. *What can she know? Feminist theory and the construction of knowledge*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Constantino, Renato. 1978. *Neocolonial identity and counter consciousness: Essays in cultural decolonization*. London: Merlin Press.
- Cooper, Anna Julia. 1892/1988. *A voice from the south*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Dewey, John. 1909. *Moral principles in education*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- DuBois, W.E.B. 1903/1969. *The souls of black folk*. New York: Signet Classic.
- Fanon, Frantz. 1967. *Black skin white masks*. New York: Grove Weidenfeld.
- Foucault, Michel. 1991. *The history of sexuality: An introduction*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Freire, Paulo. 1990. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Gates, J. 1973. *Schoolbooks and krag: The United States army in the Philippines: 1898-1902*. Westport, CN: Greenwood Press.
- George, T. 1980. *Revolt in Mindanao: The rise of Islam in Philippine politics*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.
- Gowing, Peter Gordon. 1983. *Mandate in Moroland: The American government of Muslim Filipinos, 1899-1920*. Quezon City: New Day.
- Karnow, Stanley. 1989. *In our image: America's empire in the Philippines*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Memmi, Albert. 1965. *The colonizer and the colonized*. New York: Orion Press.
- Mindanao State University Office of External Studies. 1984. *A proposal for Peace Corps Participation at the Mindanao State University system external units*. Marawi: Mindanao State University.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. 1992. *Imperial eyes: Travel writing and transculturation*. New York: Routledge.
- Roman, Leslie. 1993. White is a color! White defensiveness, Postmodernism, and Anti-racist pedagogy. In *Race, identity and representation in education*, Cameron McCarthy and Warren Crichlow, eds. New York: Routledge.
- Ruland, Richard and Malcom Bradbury. 1991. *From puritanism to postmodernism: A history of American literature*. New York: Viking.
- Saber, Mamitua. 1979. Maranao resistance to foreign invasion. *Philippine Sociological Review* 27, no. 1: 273-82.
- Said, Edward. 1979. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.
- West, Cornel. 1989. *The American evasion of philosophy: A genealogy of pragmatism*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.