

philippine studies

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

Bearers of Benevolence, by Racelis and Ick

Review Author: Pineda-Tinio

Philippine Studies vol. 50, no. 4 (2002): 581–582

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 30 13:30:20 2008

Bearers of Benevolence: The Thomasites and Public Education in the Philippines. By Mary Racelis and Judy Celine Ick. Pasig City: Anvil Publishing Inc., 2001. 335 pages.

The compilation of previously published work are welcome when they are accompanied by something new: previously unpublished material or a fresh critical perspective from which to view the old. *Bearers of Benevolence: The Thomasites and Public Education in the Philippines*, a collection of accounts and experiences of the first teachers who pioneered the American-style public school system in the Philippines, offers nothing new.

In 1959, Carmelo and Bauermann published *Tales of the American Teachers in the Philippines and the Birth of Universal Education in the Philippines*. A good fifty percent of the material in the new *Bearers of Benevolence* is taken from the 1959 book completely untouched. For example, *Bearers* uses the same excerpts from Mary Fee's book *A Woman's Impression of the Philippines* that are found in *Tales*. Given that the whole of Mary Fee's book was published in 1988, one would expect at least a different excerpt in *Bearers*.

The selections are sandwiched between two lengthy essays by the editors. The introduction, written by Mary Racelis, is both historical overview and personal account and is, by Racelis's own admission, "largely from the American point of view" (p. 15). The essay is a throwback to the 1950s, extolling the contributions of the Thomasites, highlighting the values prioritized by the American educators (punctuality, creativity over memorization, dignity of labor) and asserting that through the Thomasites, the "Filipinos could become the beacon of democracy" (p. 12). Racelis deals with the idea of resistance by asking, "Did anyone have negative feelings about the Thomasites?" Her answer, like her question, eschews the political for the personal. Filipinos, she says "disliked overbearing, arrogant Americans . . . they resented aloof and unapproachable teachers" (p. 14).

The more alarming aspect of this book, however, is its conclusion, written by Judy Celine Ick. In it, she asserts that the old paradigm of "traditional colonialism" is no longer useful and that one must view these texts with a new paradigm, a post-colonial paradigm. Rather than see the Thomasite experience as an experience of imposition, one must view it as an experience of a negotiation for power and meaning. Ick says, "What this book really lays bare is the dynamics of colonial cultural production. What we are really witnessing throughout the selections is the forging of a new culture. Contrary to the traditional paradigm that views colonialism as the imposition of a foreign culture onto a local one resulting in the obliteration of the latter, the accounts in this book reveal that somewhere between, in the tension between strangeness and sameness, a new culture was being born" (p. 267).

This is symptomatic of the mindset of many Philippine academics who use current Western perspectives. The "post-colonial" perspective, along with many other "posts" (i.e. post-modernism, post-Marxism), negates the idea of

a totalizing experience. Instead it asserts that, broadly speaking, power is negotiated between colonial masters and the colonized. Thus, the experience of colonialism is not necessarily just the experience of imposition, domination, acquiescence, and resistance, but rather a complex phenomenon characterized by assimilation, response, and new meanings. Indeed, this new perspective is a potentially rich one. However, when it is used without the benefit of history, it has the power to re-erase the previously recovered and re-marginalize the previously recognized.

This concern for new meanings is seen in Ick's example of one of the Thomasite's account of a young Bicolano girl's inability to pronounce a school-room poem the way her American teacher wanted her to:

I lub de name ob Washington;
 I lub my country too;
 I lub de flag, de dear old flag:
 Ob red and white and blue.

Ick uses this as an example of a postcolonial experience. Says Ick: "The girl's original rendition of the rhyme turns it into something else. Strangely, it is the same and yet not the same as the words on the page" (p. 267). The young girl resists pronouncing this poem the way her teacher wants her to and, instead, appropriates the words, transforms them into something different.

Ick's strain of postcolonial criticism is infected by a debilitating amnesia. The poem is clearly an example of cultural imperialism. The young girl is being familiarized with American culture; she is told to love the name of Washington. Ick asserts, however, that the poem is not clearly an act of brainwashing. She asks, "Was not her flag 'red, white, and blue' as well?" (p. 267). The question conveniently forgets the systematic and unrelenting efforts by American officials to eradicate any sense of Filipino nationalism. If only one remembered that the Flag Law of 1905 made the display of the Philippine flag illegal, one would not be in doubt as to which flag the little girl was referring to. Ick is right when she says that the little girl's rendition "turns it into something else." What that "something else" and that "new culture" are, Ick does not identify.

Ick proposes that we examine the "dogma" of our "mis-education" (i.e., that American education is "the evil that led us to our 'colonial mentality,' which is, in turn, the root of all our society's failures" [p. 263]) with new eyes, presumably the post-colonial perspective. Such a move, however, only leads us to a century-old conclusion that sees the Thomasite experience as a "mutual learning experience that continues to this day" (p. 4).

The Thomasites were principally a second army of occupation whose role was to capture the "hearts and minds" of the masses of Filipino people, while seventy thousand U.S. troops turned the Philippines into what General Smith called "a howling wilderness." Though the idiom "capturing hearts and minds" was invented during the Vietnam war to describe American propa-

ganda aimed at the local Vietnamese, it could very well have been invented for the Thomasites, for, as historian Luzviminda Francisco argues, the Philippine-American War was "the first Vietnam." This is not an old idea but an established one. It is not dogma; it is simply the truth. A reader with a critical eye easily sees American propaganda at work in many of the selections in *Bearer*s.

In the end, the "new paradigm" that Ick claims to use is not much different from the nineteenth-century concept of "manifest destiny." It is not much different from McKinley's 1899 pronouncement that "there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipino, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them." It is not much different from the perspective of the 1959 *Tales of the American Teacher in the Philippines*, where the American period is heralded for its advancement in education and democracy. It is merely given a new name: "postcolonialism."

Ma. Teresa Pineda-Tinio
Department of English
Ateneo de Manila University

Filipinos in Japan and Okinawa 1880s–1972. By Lydia N. Yu-Jose. Research Institute for the Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2002. 158 pages.

Philippine-Japan relations is the subject of a number of books published in recent years. Among them are *The Philippines under Japan: Occupation Policy and Reaction* (1999) by Setsuho Ikehata and Ricardo Jose, *Image and Reality: Philippine-Japan Relations towards the 21st Century* (1997) by Rolando S. dela Cruz, and *The Japanese Occupation of the Philippines: A Pictorial History* (1997) by Ricardo Jose and Lydia Yu-Jose.

The focus, however, has mostly been the Japanese presence in the Philippines. Yu-Jose's *Filipinos in Japan and Okinawa* is the first book-length study on the lives of Filipinos in Japan, and as such, it fills a gap in scholarship on Philippine-Japan relations. A descriptive study, it presents information, much of it new, and preliminary analyses of some 90 years of Filipino presence in Japan. The general picture is substantiated and supplemented by personal accounts taken from interviews, magazine and newspaper stories, and police reports, so that the book has a place both in the scholar's library and in the common reader's bathroom shelf.

The first chapter describes the historical conditions that prompted the entry of Filipinos in Japan. The next chapter focuses on Filipino political exiles, among them, Artemio Ricarte and Benigno Ramos. Yu-Jose notes the ideological attraction of "pan-Asianism" for a number of these exiles, as well as the