REVERSE COLONIALISM: A THEORETICAL INQUIRY INTO THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE FILIPINO COMMUNITY IN DIASPORA

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ABSTRACT

This article is a theoretical inquiry on the unique and dynamic Filipino-American relation and its impact on the Filipino immigrant community in the United States. Specifically, it examines the social construction of Filipino-American community in the context of reversing the negative impact of American colonialism. In doing so, this article frames the question not in terms of *what America has done to us*, but *what we have done* or *what we are doing despite America*. The former represents the danger of looking at our identity as the by-product of victimization—a form of pathology that often requires the pills of entitlement to cure its symptoms. The latter, on the one hand, represents a departure from the pathology of victimization towards a reconstructed and recovering community. It is my hope that this essay will help us to confront the continuing legacies of American colonialism, as well as to better understand the dynamics of contemporary Filipino-American experience.

Introduction

I do not remember a period in contemporary Asian American experience when there has been so widespread, so persistent, and so agonizing an interest in decolonizing Filipino-American relation. The long colonial history between the United States and the Philippines and its attendant contradictions and ironies still haunt the Filipino-American imagination (Ceniza-Choy, 2003; Strobel, 2001; Vergara, 1996; Hill, 1994; Enriquez, 1994). Beneath this interest is the undisputed fact that Americanization has intruded into our lives and imposed a way of life that we feel

we must continually contend with—trying to shed our skins as colonials, so to speak.

Particularly, it has become fashionable to decry the patterns of Filipino-American attitude and behavior as consequences of colonialism and to ascribe them some measure of inherent malignancy, an inner defect, a self-perpetuating pathology. And yet, I think this contention often takes the form of an over-reaction which comes, I believe, from the fundamental absence of critical analysis and study of what it is that the Filipino-American community has become, where it is now, and what it will be.

The Question of Identity

To interpret the Filipino-American experience today is to bear down straight away upon the most pressing of our problems—the question of identity in the "new world." Much of what I shall say will necessarily simplify our very complex lived experiences. Still, I hope my points will come out clearly and above all, accurately.

I argue that in order to understand the question of identity, we must understand how to analyze our Filipino-American relation in terms that are more precise and sensitive than the ones to which we have become all too familiar. I do not suggest that we must stop using terms like *colonial mentality, contracting colonialism, neo-colonialism,* or *internal colonialism,* when describing our relation, but that we must subject these terms within the context that is relatively free of old clichés that often say more about our own inadequacies than they do about the phenomenon we attempt to explain.

Any serious analysis must proceed from the right questions. So far as the Filipino-American identity is concerned, I think, we must raise the question of identity not in terms of *what America has done to us,* but *what we have done or what we are doing despite America.* The former, in my opinion, represents the danger of looking at our identity as the by-product of victimization—a form of pathology that often requires the pills of entitlement to cure its symptoms. The latter, on the one hand, for me, represents a departure from the pathology of victimization towards an identity that is recovering

and nurtured by a vigorous and healthy way of life. I shall return to this matter a little later.

Filipino Migration to the United States

The history of Filipino migration to the United States is bound to the Spanish and American imperial occupations of the Philippines. As early as 1587, many Filipinos who worked with the Spanish galleon that plied the Manila-Acapulco trade route jumped ship when the ships reached Acapulco or California rather than return to the Philippines. In 1763 the Spanish-speaking Filipinos who deserted ship, or "Manilamen" as they were commonly called then, were already living along the bayous and marshes of Louisiana (Espina, 1988). However, the first Filipino mass migration to the United States was initiated by the 1898 Treaty of Paris. Spain ceded the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam to the United States for the payment of $20 million.

The acquisition of the Philippines as a territory by the United States allowed Filipinos to immigrate as nationals without any quota system. The first influx of migrants (from 1900 until 1930) consisted, along with government-sponsored "pensionados" (children of the Filipino elite) and self-supporting students, mainly of young, unskilled bachelors who had been recruited as farm workers for the agricultural fields of Hawaii and California, as stewards for the U.S. Navy, and as laborers for the salmon canneries of Alaska. Their numbers totaled approximately 100.000 by the middle of the 1930s.

The second period of Filipino migration (from 1931 until 1965) intersected with the Great Depression of the 1930s. The anti-Filipino sentiments led to the passage of the Tydings-McDuffie Law which guaranteed independence to the Philippines in ten years. The law declared all Filipino nationals as aliens and restricted their immigration quota to fifty a year. Most Filipinos gaining entry to the U.S. were persons who were able to bypass discriminatory regulations. Many served gallantly in the American military during World War II. Others claimed to have relatives as citizens. Despite stiff restrictions,

the Filipino population grew steadily and had reached 250,000 by 1964.

The third period of Filipino migration to the United States greatly increased with the passage of the liberalized Immigration Act of 1965. This act neutralized the highly selective system of national quota and increased the number of temporary visitor and preference-immigrant visas based on family relationships and desired professional skills. Today, the number of immigrant visas granted annually to Filipinos exceeds 35,000. Presently, the total population of Filipino-Americans numbers about 2 million (more than 1 million live in California), making us the second largest Asian ethnic group in this country, Chinese-American, being the first.

The Matrices of Filipino Identity

If this is so, then what matters more? Here, we must proceed to make some preliminary distinctions and point-of-references to understand our presence. Historically, there are three matrices that cradle the Filipino-American identity. These matrices had certain peculiar elements which left their indelible imprints on our lives. They provide us the basic metaphor and vocabulary for our individual, as well as our communal experiences. And these, in turn, supply both the language of discourse and the rationale of our very existence. It provides us the framework of discourse of *who we are, how we see ourselves, how we claim ourselves,* and *how we reproduce our communities,* in short, *how we live.*

The first is the **folkloric matrix**. Conceived in precolonial times, its symbol is the self-sufficient *barangay* (village or tribe) and the autonomous *Datu* (chieftain). It is our way of life based on familism, kinship, and blood relationships. Nourished by the tropical economy of compulsion and group survival, it is still found among members of the family, distant relatives, old acquaintances, honored friends, and hometown friends. It is in this type of matrix that a totality of beliefs and sentiments common to many Filipinos exist—a socialized feeling of face-to-face and primary relationships embedded in mutualism,

collective orientation, and "we" feeling of the village life. The American sociologist, Charles Horton Cooley (1918), suggests that:

> Such groups are primary...in that they are fundamental in forming the social nature and ideals of the individual. The result of intimate association, psychologically, is a certain fusion of individualities in a common whole, so that one's very self, for many purposes at least, is the common life and purpose of the group. Perhaps the simplest way of describing this wholeness is by saying that it is a "we"; it involves the sort of sympathy and mutual identification for which "we" is the natural expression. One lives in the feeling of the whole and finds the chief aim of his will in that feeling.

The second is the **colonial matrix**. Here was the imperial imprimatur of the Spanish principle of **Transference of Sanctity** and the American ideology of **Manifest Destiny**. The Spaniards constructed their Catholic churches and government buildings, and plaza complexes on sites previously occupied by the native religious or village structures. By using this principle, the sacredness of the indigenous places was transferred to their Christian successors and the power of the "old order" was usurped by the "new order" (Brunn & Williams, 1993). On the other hand, the Americans debated the morality of the conquest and possession of the Philippines, but in the end, succumbed to what John Fiske (1885) claimed in his essay entitled *Manifest Destiny*.

The work which the English race began when it colonized North America is destined to go on until every land on the earth's surface that is not already the seat of an old civilization shall become English in its language, in its political habits and traditions, and to a predominant extent in the blood of its people.

On December 21, 1898 President William Mckinley announced his decision to keep the Philippines as an American colonial possession. He described the mission of the United States as one of **Benevolent Assimilation**. On January 4, 1899 General Elwell Otis was named the commander of American ground forces in the Philippines, which was to "extend by force American sovereignty over this country."

The colonizers found themselves bound by an unprecedented drive to take possession of a territory; and their histories were histories of uncontrollable people who grabbed the forest and skinned it, who turned rice fields to sugarcane fields; soldiers who prospected with friars, priests, and missionaries, and sometimes stupidly, tortured and massacred Filipinos, in the mad scramble to pacify and control the natives. It is estimated that about eight hundred thousand to one million Filipinos died during the Filipino-American War of 1899-1902. Devoid of sacred sentiments, the colonizers imposed a secular and calculating superordination-subordination relations which replaced the "ways of the folk." The rationalistic system of colonialism destroyed social solidarity and promoted the worst form of alienated individualism without the spirit of community.

One particular condition emerged out of this experience—the Filipino elite was produced and reproduced (Majul, 1977). During the Spanish regime, this elitism embodied a new manner of compulsion legitimated by *caciquism* where the *barangay* chiefs became the native elite, who now collaborated with the colonial masters and bossed their way over the unfortunate *timawa* (common people). Under American tutelage, the "policy of attraction" was instituted where wealthy and conservative *ilustrados*, the self-described "oligarchy of the enlightened," who had a history of willingness to negotiate with colonial masters eventually advocated acceptance of American rule.

And yet, as colonial subjects, they were the mouthpieces (sometimes unwilling) of the Spanish and American authorities. Consequently, when the traditional chief's authority declined, the ways of the folk embedded in the village also declined.

The result is clear; in due time, the *Datu* evolved into a *cacique*, and eventually into a *boss*. Interestingly, after a century of independence, the Philippines still stands today as a bossist society sustained by "pork barrel" and patronage politics.

The scattering of Filipinos all over the world refers to the **diasporic matrix**. According to the Filipino writer N.V.M. Gonzalez (1996):

> It is a myth we live by unknowingly as individuals, and more so, as a people. In the Philippine imagination it has been seeded for generations in the **Ibon Adarna** story about an ailing father with three sons. They must set into the world and return with the cure for their suffering parent.

Diaspora comes from the Greek words *dia* (through) and *speirein* (spores). In biology, the *diaspores* carried by various media like heat, water, or wind are scattered to regenerate life where they fall, perhaps resembling a new colony. As a metaphor for the Filipino labor migration, it represents to us an opportunity to grow and recover in the "new world."

Dispossession in the Old World

As a former colony, we lived lives rendered by the colonial masters in terms of paternalistic arrogance. We were the "savages" and the "people sitting in darkness," and for these reasons, deserved to be ruled as wards (Bain, 1984). As wards, majority of the Filipinos were dispossessed in their own land, while the elite, thirsting for political and economic participation, were coopted by the American rulers. The Americans granted them privileged political and economic positions. In tandem with each other, they appropriated to themselves large tracts of national posterity for agricultural and commercial pursuits—a legacy of dispossession that still

smolders contemporary Philippine society with an unending land and agrarian conflict (Kerkvliet, 1990).

Denied our name and birthright, some Filipinos revolted and some migrated, while the elite defended and protected their privileged positions. Unfortunately, after independence, Filipino leaders and the elite did not fare well. Still beholden to the former colonial masters for monetary support and trade preference, they resorted to panhandling, an interesting affair with an effect of producing what one American diplomat calls "a neurotic, manipulative, psychically crippling form of dependency" (Underhill, 1977).

And yet, despite this myopic vision of mendicancy, many Filipinos in diaspora did not forget the "ways of the folk." Taken as a whole, neither the internal or external polemics against Filipino culture, nor the numerous news and articles on Philippine corruption, nor the attempt to evaluate Filipino politics in terms of thievery, greed, and selfishness have noticeably prejudiced the humility and will of many Filipinos to redeem and recover themselves in the place of relocation.

Indeed, there is much more to the Philippines than her destitute state. It is my thinking that from the subsequent wreckage of our culture and people will emerge the **Filipino Presence,** which will bear the unmistakable marks of a reconstructed and transformed immigrant community.

Transformation in the New World

In the United States, given the theoretical construction of minority relations within the framework of what we consider as political principles, our relation with the former masters had to be viewed against the background of their adherence to democratic ideals. For many Filipinos, this is very significant because it represents to us a rejection of the colonizer-colonized relationship and landlord-peasant mentality of the plantation economy of the old world.

Unlike the old world, the new world places us on a vantage point where we face the so-called colonial masters in a different light. Perhaps, in the new world, the colonial masters

became victims of their own democratic propaganda (which they freely violated in the old world), so to speak. Interestingly, no problem in America is more serious than that of minority groups being unfairly treated. Because injustice and violence still plague majority-minority relations in America, it has become not only apparent but even more urgent that the treatment of all people on equal basis is the only solution.

If this is so, what happens then to Filipinos who have been accustomed to being subordinated when suddenly placed in social positions of more or less equal footing with those whom they used to consider their masters? Are there processes of transformation? Do we continue our subordination as colonials? Do we undo the colonial relationship by carving an ethnic space and reconstructing our communities in the new world? Are we now undoing and reversing the negative impact of colonial subjugation?

Nowhere is such transformation more evident than in the United States. Take for example a selected socioeconomic profile of the Filipino community based on the 2000 U.S. Census:

Of the 948,364 employed Filipinos aged 16 years old and over, more than half are working in three industries: 29% in education, health, and social services, 13% in manufacturing, 10% in retail, and 9% in white-collar jobs.

The median income of the Filipino family is $65,189.00, third behind the Japanese Americans ($70,849.00) and Asian Indians ($70,708.00). Other Asian groups registered the following: Chinese Americans ($60,058.00); Korean Americans ($47,624.00); Vietnamese Americans ($47,103). When compared to the median family income of whites ($50,046.00), Filipino income is about 23% higher; about 47% higher than Hispanics ($34,397.00); and about 49% higher than Blacks ($33,255.00). Twenty five percent of the Filipino households have incomes over $50,000.00/year and slightly over 7% makes income under $15,000.00/year.

Another feature of that fundamental change is the overseas remittances for the home country. Starting from a little more

than $100 million in 1975, it hit the $12 billion mark in 2004. The Philippine government incorporates overseas remittances into the GNP as part of export earnings. To date, the share of overseas remittances in total yearly exports has already reached a record high of 20.3 percent.

For a country whose per capita gross national income is a meager $1,080.00/year (BBC News, 2004), the Filipino diaspora makes a critical difference not only in the economy of the home country, but also in the psyche of the Filipino community abroad. The growing participation of our community through our regional associations and social organizations in raising funds and donations for various local projects in the home country attests to the transforming power of our community. But more importantly, in the process of participating in the affairs of the home country, we transform our community as a transnational agent of change and recovery.

Reverse Colonialism

The realization that the "rules of the game" have changed and are changing in the new world is crucial to our understanding of **reverse colonialism**. To define what I mean by this psycho-geographic phenomenon, allow me to propose the following hypotheses:

> *1. Reverse colonialism is a function of relative power.*
> *2. Relative power is a function of the ability to appropriate and control space.*
> *3. The ability to appropriate and control space is a function of enclave formation.*
> *4. Therefore, reverse colonialism is a function of enclave formation.*

Territoriality and Sense of Place

It is my thinking that reverse colonialism occurs because the immigrants carry in themselves the seeds of transformation in their place of relocation. It is also my thinking that the place of relocation becomes that space which materializes itself in

terms of "territoriality" and "sense of place." The obvious importance of these two elements is undeniable. It is a cant that biologists, ecologists, geographers, psychologists, and sociologists pay attention to because it provides a fertile ground for the study of autonomy and situated action (Canlas, 2002; Ardrey, 1966; Bell, Fisher, & Loomis, 1978; Goffman, 1963, 1971; Tuan, 1977).

Territoriality refers to the tendency to partition space and to maintain and defend it as an exclusive preserve which may involve the following: 1) as an expression of social organization that supplies a stable basis for the smooth functioning of society; 2) as a mechanism that people employ in order to bring their living spaces under their control; and 3) as an expression of ownership, appropriate conduct, or identity (Gold, 1982). **Sense of Place**, on the other hand, while may be bound to the former, connotes a more symbolic meaning. People are not only territorial, but also recreate and attach meanings to their surroundings. Thus, urban enclaves such as San Francisco's South of Market, Daly City, Union City, and Stockton in California are not only spatial settings for us, but also localities that remind us of the taste, smell, looks, and sound of the "old world." Once again, in the metaphors of N.V.M. Gonzalez (1996): "California is just a province of the Philippines."

Conclusion

What I have been discussing is a cursory and superficial treatment of a complex idea. To some of us, reverse colonialism is both a conscious or unconscious recovery born out of our humility and will to rediscover the primordial idealisms and realities we have forgotten and continue to forget in the course of our histories as peoples. Unlike imperial colonialism conceived through conquest and aggression, reverse colonialism is a mutualistic process of continual reconstruction of materials drawn from the past and located in a specific time and space. Thereafter, it becomes a practice of everyday life's

production and reproduction toward a reconstructed and transformed community.

I know there is no simple way of explaining this important aspect of the Filipinos in diaspora, except to say , as I have been saying of it, that it is the way of life of our community and it will be in the future. The title of a poem by the Filipino poet Jose Garcia Villa (1941) impressed me a great deal. Alluding to himself in America, he wrote, "Have Come, Am Here." Here in America, Filipino Americans could not be presented better than in those words.

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