

THE FILIPINO DIASPORA¹

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I would like to share with you some thoughts about what I have been doing in the United States in this short lecture. One of my areas of specialization is the Filipino Diaspora which simply means the scattering of Filipinos all over the world. As Associate Director of the Center for Filipino Studies, I have been privileged to head this particular project on the study of the Filipino Diaspora. The phenomenon of the people going all over the world is nothing new. As you may note, there are about two million Filipinos in North America, including Canada. Another two million are in Saudi Arabia and about 50 thousand in Europe. Probably one of its main ramifications as far as our experience as a people is concerned is that we are continually recreating our identity. We are not only talking of Filipinos in the Philippines, but we are also talking of Filipinos all over the world.

Let me propose to you three models upon which to discuss the Filipino presence. The first model is what I call **folkloric**. The folkloric Filipino identity has its roots in pre-colonial times. Its symbol is the self-sufficient *barangay* and the autonomous *datu*. It is our way of life based on familism, kinship and blood relationships. Nourished by devotion and hospitality, this way of life is still found among members of the family, distant relatives, old acquaintances, and old hometown friends. I would say that even the Silliman Spirit would fall within the context of what I call folkloric - meaning that it is identified with what we call the WE, WE-FEELING - a socialized understanding of self in relation to other people.

The second matrix is what I call **colonial**. Here was the imperial imprimatur of the Spanish principle of transference of sanctity and an extension of the American ideology of "manifest destiny." As you will note, if we go back to our Philippine history, the Spaniards constructed their Christian churches and government buildings and plaza complexes on sites previously occupied by the native religious or village structures. By using this principle of transference of sanctity, the sacredness of the indigenous places was transferred to their Christian successors and the power of the old order was usurped

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by the new order. Two of the best manifestations of this transference of sanctity are the *Ati-atihan* and the Black Nazarene. We know that the indigenous people assimilated the Spanish influence, but with some of what we call folkloric element.

One particular condition emerged out of the colonial experience. As described by Professor Cesar Adib Majul, the Filipino elite was produced and reproduced. Now, during the Spanish regime, this elitism embodied a new way of life manifested by *caciquism* where the barangay chiefs, according to Majul, became the native elite who collaborated with the colonial masters and bossed their way over the unfortunate "common *tao*." The chieftain became the *cacique* boss incarnate. But as a colonial subject, he was merely the unwilling mouthpiece of the Spanish friars. When the traditional chief's autonomy and authority declined, the ways of the folks embedded in the barangay also declined. The result is clear. In due time, the barangay evolved into *caciquism* and eventually into "bossism."

The American colonial experience, on the other hand, imposed a rationalistic system of colonialism which was antithetical to the folkloric behavior. In contrast to the folkloric which strongly embodies of the *WE-FEELING*, or the feeling of sentiment with one another, the rationalistic system which was basically colonialistic promoted the worst forms of alienated individualism without the spirit of the community which was embedded in the folkloric life.

Interestingly, the current Philippine bossist society owes its life to these colonial fathers. When I was in Silliman, I could not understand why people would call the superior as "Boss"- "Boss, kumusta ka, Boss?" But in the process I found out that this has a long history because what the colonials did was to make bosses out of the native elite. Politics in the Philippines exemplifies an area of life in which this concept of bossism is deeply etched. We have a long history of that. That is the second model.

The third model is what I call the Diasporic model. The scattering of Filipinos all over the world refers to the third matrix called **diasporic**. According to N.V.M. Gonzales, one of our Filipino writers, it is a cultural sentiment deeply rooted in the Filipino consciousness as individuals and as a people. This sentiment has been embodied for generations in the *Ibong Adarna* story about an ailing Father and his three sons. They must set out into the world and return with the cure for their suffering parent.

Diaspora comes from the word *Dia*. In Biology, *dia* means through while *sphere* means pores. In Biology, diaspores are carried by the various agents such as wind or water to regenerate life where they fall, perhaps resembling a new colony. It is from this context that the Filipino diaspora must be understood. It will be recalled that as a former colony, Filipinos lived lives redefined and rendered by the colonial masters in terms of

paternalistic arrogance. We were the savages and people sitting in darkness, and for that reason deserved to be ruled as wards. As wards, we were led and sometimes betrayed to satisfy the master's ambitions and self-interests. Dispossessed of our name and birthright, many poor Filipinos revolted and eked out a living to survive while many elite collaborated with the colonial masters to protect their privileged positions. Unfortunately, after independence, the Filipino leaders and the elite did not fare well. Still beholden to their former colonial master for military support, they resorted to panhandling - an interesting affair with an effect of producing what an American diplomat calls "a neurotic, manipulative, psychically crippling form of dependency."

But I believe that despite this form of mendicancy, many Filipinos did not forget the ways of the folks. Taken as a whole, neither the internal nor external polemics against Filipino culture, nor the numerous news and articles on Philippine corruption, or the attempts to evaluate Filipino politics in terms of slavery and greed and selfishness have noticeably prejudiced the dignity and will of many Filipinos to redeem themselves and succeed in the new world.

Let me give you some of the data that I found, for example, of Filipinos in the United States. The 1990 census reflects some fundamental changes in that relationships. The median income of the Filipino family in the United States right now is about \$46,698 annually, third behind the Japanese which is \$51,550 a year and Asian Indians which is \$49,309. Sixty-two per cent of the Filipino households have incomes over \$35,000 a year while slightly over 10% make income under \$15,000 a year. When compared to the median family income of Whites of \$31,435, Filipino income is 32% higher. I think one interesting feature of this diasporic experience is the overseas remittances. We found out for example, that in the United States alone Filipinos remit a total of about \$2 billion a year to the Philippines. \$2 billion, just from the United States, excluding Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern countries.

Now, for me, this idea of diaspora redefines our identity as a people. That is why I would like to look at our experience as a people as folkloric, colonial and diasporic. But the whole diasporic experience has to be embedded within the folkloric experience. When I was discussing this with some intellectuals in the United States, such as N.V.M. Gonzales and Professor Majul, we came to a sort of general point that we should go back to reclaiming our dialects. I would like to see in Silliman an Institute of Cebuano Studies, or Ilongo Studies or in Iloilo Karay-a Studies because we are losing our folkloric roots, and there is no way we can totally eliminate these experiences.

So I would like to encourage my fellow Sillimanians to continue to support this type of thinking. Thank you very much.