

Hispanic-Filipino Identity: Loss and Recovery

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Interest

We wish to present the hypothesis that the loss of Hispanic-Filipino identity and memory during the North American colonial period led to a decontextualized, unbalanced treatment of the Hispanic-Filipino era (1521-1898) in Philippine history texts.

We propose that the current state of diffuse Filipino cultural identity and historical awareness is the product of a historical, psychosocial rupture whose consequence was the loss of Hispanic-Filipino memory and identity.

We believe that a reorientation of Philippine history and culture toward the recovery of the Hispanic-Filipino memory is possible through the application of a global approach to the past that will take into account its cultural and psychological complexity.

Point of View

Cultural identity is the result of the accumulation of historical process and arises in all members of a society once a critical mass of social and historical experience is reached. When a people attain collective self-awareness, the image of the larger, cohesive Self is behaviorally expressed in the articulation and materialization of the will to sovereign nationhood. The study of cultural identity and mentality shift is virtually undeveloped in Philippine historiography. Today the reflection on these issues begins to be perceived as an imperative for Filipinos to understand their past and correctly emplace themselves in global culture, history and coexistence, so that they may occupy the position of importance that their unique historical experience and cultural legacy have conferred on them.

Filipino historical writing must move beyond simple chronology, past the external narrative and partial interpretation that leave out this history's cultural complexity and thus renders it unintelligible. Methodological hermeneutics is a tool for penetrating into deeper levels of significance in historical documentation in order to "discover the world that corresponds to the text," and is key to accessing the cultural past that is preserved in our historical documents but that cannot be faithfully interpreted unless the inquirer is able to bridge the considerable temporal and cultural distances that separate her from the texts.

Hypothesis

Filipino history is marked by two successive colonizations, separated by a brief interregnum in which the First Filipino Republic – the synthesis of 377 years of Hispanic-Filipino historical process – was founded and then dismantled. Said history has been presented as an external narrative that does not consider the multiple processes of

psychosocial upheaval that were concatenated between 1896 and 1913, and whose consequences undoubtedly continue to act over the present.

Given the fact of our serial colonization, the study of *mentalité* – that is, the shifts in historical and cultural consciousness that are brought about by radical changes of psychosocial and political paradigms – is a requirement for the profound comprehension of Filipino history.

DEVELOPMENT

The Identity Gap as Dissociation from the Hispanic-Filipino Past

The loss of Hispanic-Filipino identity is expressed today in the psychological and emotional dissociation of postmodern Filipinos from the Hispanic-Filipino world. However, the Filipinos of today have the erroneous belief, fostered by the history books, that there is no significant cultural gap between them and the Generation of 1896. The fact however, is that the North American triumph over the First Republic and the subsequent restructuring of Filipino societal life, culture and identity between 1901 and 1945 constituted a violent rupture on all levels for the Hispanic-Filipino people. Linguistic change, education, technological transformation and the spread of U.S. customs, mores and cultural forms through telecommunications erased the Hispanic-Filipino memory and dissociated the nation from its Hispanic-Filipino forebears.

However, the most serious cause of the dissociation of the Filipino consciousness from that Hispanic past was *not* the radical change from a religious, tradition-bound, Hispanized cultural landscape to an Anglo-Saxon secular, technical modernity. The major factor of the dissociation was *the disappearance of the Hispanic-Filipino generation* that first, led the movement for assimilation and equality of rights under Spain, and, second, led the Revolution and the founding of the Republic. The flower of this generation of paradigmatic Filipinos was eliminated from the life and leadership of the new nation through death and exile. But after the establishment of North American rule, the survivors of that heroic generation were margined from social and national life and replaced by the non-nationalist ilustrados who became the Americans' collaborators. A betrayal was thus perpetrated, through the false discourse that the failed national project was being continued, this time under more benevolent, democratic guardians – the very same ones who had destroyed that national project. Furthermore, the fatal condition for the alleged continuation of the struggle for independence was the renouncement of the past. This renouncement was transferred to the new generations in the form of the loss of their cultural moorings, upon the forgetting of their parents' and grandparents' psychosomatic grounding in the Hispanic-Filipino world.

The dramatic severing and forgetting of those bonds created a legacy of ahistoricity and disconcertment in the face of a documentary Himalayas in the Spanish language, whose reality could not be denied and that had to be climbed, simply because *it was there*. Three generations of Filipino historians – whose elders were formed under the U.S. colonial regime and adopted the banner of Filipino idiomatic and ethnic purity and rejected Spanish and mestizo culture – began to minimize the Hispanic historical component and emphasize

the Asian racial and geographical elements in the equation of Filipino identity. Nonetheless, the result of their efforts has been the exacerbation of cultural diffuseness and alienation in a people whose behavior is marked today by diaspora and non-definition. The country itself, rather than confidently striding toward unification and recovery of the mystique of self-determination that still smoulders with life in the historical accounts of the late 19th century, seems to move with increasing velocity in an entropic direction. The Centennial of the First Republic made it abundantly clear that the national soul continues to hang onto the fragile thread of nostalgia in the midst of an endemic climate of drift that permeates every sphere of national life.

We call this “climate of drift”: dissociation.

Nature and Manifestations of Hispanic-Filipino Dissociation

The nature of the dissociation is simple: the Filipinos of today did not experience the culture of Hispanic Philippines; Spanish has been lost in the Philippines as a living language; and there is a strong cultural and historiographical bias against the Spanish colonial period.

The loss of deep understanding of the Hispanic period – and of the empathy that is only possible when there is comprehension – has led to a curious representation of the “Spanish era” as a temporal-spatial field that was solely inhabited and developed by Spaniards, who lived, thought and acted in total separation from the indigenous population and then left, practically taking everything with them and leaving no trace of their culture behind. It is only in the latter half of the 19th century that the native Filipino image acquires visibility as a historical protagonist; however, such image is not correctly defined as *Hispanic-Filipino* and is *implicitly equated with the image of the modern Filipino*. We believe this is the result of the understandable feelings of identification of North Americanized Filipino historians and writers with the heroes of the Propaganda Movement and the Revolutionary and Republican period, whose most important figures they assumed were non-mestizos from the middle class and the commonfolk. It has however been overlooked that those Filipinos – absolutely all of them – were Hispanic-Filipinos. Even Andrés Bonifacio, though he initiated the schismatic crusade against everything Spanish, was a creature of that very milieu. All Filipinos born in our country before and during the 19th century were Hispanic-Filipinos. The Filipinos born during and after the American period, on the other hand, became North Americanized Filipinos, which is what we are today.

Therefore, we are perforce historically and culturally separated from the original Filipinos – the first Filipinos to acquire national consciousness – and this fact has not been properly registered and acknowledged in our history texts. Instead there is a curious, unquestioned belief that nothing really changed between 1898 and 1946, except our government and our language. The American period was – as historian-writer Isagani Cruz describes it – a short though traumatic occupation. However, we propose that, though short, it nonetheless dealt the Philippines a much more traumatic blow than all the previous 377 years of Spanish rule.

What did such traumatic blow consist of? (1) The destruction of the Hispanic-Filipino project of national liberation in 1896 and of republican creation in 1898; (2) the dismantling of Hispanic-Filipino culture and identity; (3) the betrayal of self and nation by the non-nationalist ilustrados who became the Americans' supporters and apprentices, and (4) the inescapable conditioning of our culture and history by the power of the U.S., which made the future generations the inheritors of cultural alienation and a deformed historiography. All of which have had grievous social, political and moral repercussions on the country's future development – in other words, for the reality of the Filipinos of today.

It is a fact that today, the Filipino is North Americanized and no longer Hispanic. It is not our interest to deny such fact or to culturally disparage it. Rather, our interest is to encourage the North-Americanized Filipino of today to undertake a serious sounding of the subterranean Hispanic-Filipino layer that underlies the surface North American one, because only in this way will it be possible for the Filipino nation to feel grounded in a profound spiritual substratum of great historical and cultural weight which bonds them psychosomatically to the Latin American peoples. It is not our intention to deny, in other words, the complexity of Filipino ontology and historiography; rather, to honor and do it justice.

We also propose that the legacy of self-betrayal and collaboration with the obliteration of the past must be given serious reflection by our historians and cultural guardians, and decisions must be made as well toward correcting the historical and educational deformations that arose from them and that have led to the cultural impoverishment of the Filipino people, upon their separation from their historical and cultural family – the Spanish and Latin American nations.

CONCLUSION

It is our perception that, in the case of Filipino historiography, time has already done its work and we are finally in a position today to reformulate our approach to the past, with a view to correcting the errors of interpretation and filling up the chasms created by amnesia and the shrinking of our cultural horizons. Said errors have not been the result of deliberate negligence but are the historico-cultural burden created by the unavoidable action of forces beyond our control.

We believe that by emplacing and studying Filipino history within the major context of the process of the Spanish Empire and comparing it to the histories of the Latin American nations, it will be possible for us to attain a global and intelligible vision of our history. Through the cultivation of enriched cultural relations with Spain and the creation of new bonds with Latin America, we can recover our Hispanic-Filipino memory and consciousness, and gain access to the profound meanings in our historical documentation that cultural ignorance and memory loss had kept hidden – preventing us from holistically understanding and valuing the past, and therefore ourselves.

Thus, despite the fact that we are where we are today due to the action of what could be described as fatal destiny, the future is indeed in our hands.

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