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Philippine Social History

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Book Reviews

PHILIPPINE SOCIAL HISTORY: GLOBAL AND LOCAL TRANSFORMATIONS. Edited by Alfred W. McCoy and Ed. C. de Jesus. Asian Studies Association of Australia: Southeast Asia Publications Series, No. 7. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press. Sydney: George Allen and Unwin, 1982. ix + 479 pages, maps, tables.

How to introduce this multiauthored book to readers who need it most is not easy. Not that it is a bad book; on the contrary, it is the first of its kind in Philippine historiography. The least it can do is upset certain assumptions blithely accepted as points of departure in any conversation about the current social scene of the Philippines.

Ten years in its planning and writing, *Philippine Social History* is a collection of thirteen essays (fifteen if we include the introduction and conclusion by the co-editors) on various aspects of the socioeconomic development of the Philippines from the latter half of the nineteenth century to the early decades of the present. Seven essays trace developments in Luzon, three in the Visayas, and three also in Mindanao. The longest is a sixty-page analysis of the rise and fall of Iloilo City as the premier commercial port in the Visayas, by Alfred W. McCoy, and the shortest is the seventeen page essay by Ed. C. de Jesus who writes about the transformations brought about by the tobacco monopoly in the Cagayan valley.

Of the thirteen contributors to the book, only two are Filipinos: de Jesus, already mentioned, and Milagros C. Guerrero, who entitles her study "The Provincial and Municipal Elites of Luzon During the Revolution, 1898-1902." This lack of Filipino collaborators is more significant than it might appear at first. As pointed out in the introductory essay, the social history of the Philippines is a latecomer, a step behind that of Indonesia, and certainly of Europe and of the two Americas. The reason is not hard to find. Until the imposition of martial law in 1972, the Philippines has not had a chance to develop its own personality. A new president used to be elected every four years, an exercise not only taxing to its limited economic resources ("politics is the best business"), but also inhibitive of any chance for continuity in any government policies. If we look farther back, we see that the Philippines was

just beginning to mature under American political tutelage when Japanese bombs shattered whatever the future had in store for it. In other words, the country was always beginning and reconstructing, and priorities centered around the elemental need to survive. Research and historical study cannot thrive in such conditions.

Although necessarily brief, these essays offer much food for thought. Certainly, the fact that it was the native elite, or the *principalía* who exploited their less fortunate fellow Filipinos, as de Jesus shows in his study (a position confirmed by the documentation preserved in the Dominican archives for other regions) should give pause to those for whom the colonial regimes of Spain and the United States are the favorite whipping-boy for the present ills of Philippine society. Likewise, McLennan observes that the process which had transformed the central plain of Luzon into the most important rice-producing region of the Philippines actually exemplifies "man's abuse of the environment to the point where its productive capacity is threatened" (p. 58). If true, we must take a long, hard look lest "such an important food-producing region [become] a social and economic disaster of the first magnitude" (p. 82). There is need, in other words, for a rational approach, and those charged with decision-making might do well to listen for once to the voices of Academe.

A problem the editors had to settle was how detailed local or regional studies could be before the researcher would be judged to have begun to lose sight of the wider national picture. While it is true that traditional historiography has concentrated on Manila, it is always possible that the opposite approach may cause one to lose the forest for the trees. To avoid both extremes, the editors decided that the study of local Philippine social changes is best viewed against global trade currents.

It is beyond my competence to pass judgment on this methodological approach. But Norman G. Owen's "Abaca in Kabikolan: Prosperity without Progress" (pp. 191-216) analyzes how a specified region changed to meet worldwide economic needs. Yet, he adds, because the Bicolanos had no "control of their own polity and economy" (p. 210), their fortunes rose and fell together with the fate of abaca, the only product they had exported to a world market. However, despite editorial limitations, the essay could still have included a more detailed explanation for this "prosperity without progress." What progress is meant? And what about the rains and typhoons that paralyze the Bicol region with amazing regularity? What about the lack of communications with Manila? One factor that has enhanced the greater socioeconomic growth of central Luzon is its easy linkage with Manila, a lack until now not fully satisfied for Bicolandia. The frustrations and delays when one takes the train to Legazpi are well known. No one is surprised if on any given day a flight to Catanduanes is cancelled without previous warning because of the weather.

Mutatis mutandis, the same remark is applicable to Samar — as well as to the eastern Mindanao coast. (Incidentally, this part is not included in these essays.) Until the advent of modern transportation, these areas were isolated from the rest of the colony for about five or six months during each monsoon season. It is, therefore, not surprising that their development has been stunted, and Samar has turned out to be an unlikely subject for “an analysis of the relation between [regional] economic change . . . and the demands of the world economy” (p. 238). However, Samar served as a source of raw materials for the “real centres of Philippine economy — Cebu, Iloilo, Manila.” Somehow that island province was finally led out of its lethargy by means of “economic changes, reinforced by tighter communications and administrative systems,” as was happening elsewhere in the Philippines at the same time. Samar’s regional history, therefore, seems to disprove the validity of the editors’ methodological perspective. On the other hand, the study of this “regional backwater . . . suggests new interpretations and directions of research into the larger history of the Philippine archipelago” (p. 240).

These essays make no claim to present a total picture of Philippine society; the book’s subtitle makes that clear. But they serve as both a starting point and a guide for future historical studies, as de Jesus indicates in the concluding essay (pp. 447-53). Not sufficiently analyzed, in my view, is the demographic potential of Philippine history. History presupposes a minimum number of human agents, whose collective tensions and reactions are the ingredient of historical growth. Nor will statistics alone be enough. Their dynamism must be examined: the population increases or decreases, local and foreign migrations, health, distribution according to age, sex, occupation, who owns which property and in what proportion of the total wealth of any given region, who makes the decisions that affect community life, how the people express their joys and sorrows, etc. These are some of the issues that await the future historian.

José S. Arcilla, S.J.

GEOMETRIES, BRIGHT AND DARK. By Federico L. Espino, Jr. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1981. iv + 108 pages.

Philippine literature exists in Spanish, English, Pilipino and the vernaculars. A few writers express themselves, with varying success, in two or three of these media, but it is not often that an author writes in all four. Federico Licsi Espino Jr., one of the most prolific writers in post-war Philippine literature, is the exception. He writes in Spanish, English, Pilipino and Ilokano, and Francisco Arcellana, University of the Philippines critic and writer, says with some awe that Espino is now learning to write in Bikol! Cirilo Bautista, another Philippine poet of merit, says that Espino was born with a fountain pen in