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Visible Japanese and Invisible Filipino Narratives of the Development of Davao, 1900s to 1930s

Although the southern Philippine province of Davao had the largest number of Japanese inhabitants in Southeast Asia before the Second World War, the Japanese in Davao were a minority compared with the Filipino settlers there. Nonetheless, the literature has focused predominantly on the role of the Japanese in the development of Davao's abaca (Manila hemp) industry and, by extension, the development of Davao itself during the period of American colonial rule. This article seeks to explain, given this predominant focus on the Japanese, the relative invisibility of Filipinos in the narratives of Davao's development during the period of the 1900s to the 1930s.

KEYWORDS: DAVAO · MINDANAO · FILIPINO SETTLERS · JAPANESE MIGRANTS · ABACA

In March 1937 Davao Province gained a chartered city after its main town, Davao, met the tax-based financial requisite for chartered cities during the Commonwealth era in the Philippines (Corcino 1997, 77, 85). Davao City was young compared with other cities located in the provinces of Zamboanga, Cebu, and Iloilo, which gained cityhood in the same year. Davao City and the province it represented were only largely urbanized during the American colonial period, while the other cities had already been towns during the Spanish era. The creation of Davao City was an indication of the phenomenal growth not only of the city but also of the whole province of Davao. Just as the province cannot be divorced from the city that bears its name, so must the city of Davao be considered as the city that just before the Second World War contained the largest portion (at 33 percent) of the provincial population (Commission of the Census 1940a, 1:4). The word Davao, when used in this article, refers mainly to the province, which includes the city created in 1937.

Davao's development is attributable to settlers who came during the first half of the twentieth century. Among the majority were Christian Filipinos from other Philippine islands, particularly in the Visayas. Among the minority settlers were American plantation owners who, beginning in the 1920s, started to be replaced by Japanese investors, although most Japanese immigrants came as laborers (see table on p. 104).

The Japanese laborers and investors are almost always mentioned in the extant literature as the developers of the abaca (internationally known as Manila hemp) industry, following the initial but largely unsustainable efforts of the American pioneers in the first decade of the twentieth century. The abaca industry, in turn, is regarded as practically the sole factor that accounted for the rapid development of Davao. The absence of accounts about Filipino settlers gives the impression that they had no role at all in Davao's development—an impression that accompanies the privileging of the Japanese in Davao's development. But to conclude out of such silence that Filipinos had no role would be hasty and illogical. Indeed, if Filipino settlers did not contribute anything, the extant literature would have been explicit about it. But no such claim is made. There is only silence.

This article aims to explain why the literature has focused predominantly on the role of the Japanese in the development of the abaca industry in Davao and of Davao itself during the period of American colonial rule, specifically from the 1900s to the 1930s. This predominant focus on the

Japanese naturally leads to the question why Filipinos remained relatively invisible in these narratives.

But why revisit an old story? The fact is that the story of the hemp industry and the wealth it brought to Davao and to Japanese immigrants lasted less than half a century and, as hindsight shows, were not meant to last any longer. On 20 February 1956, just about ten years after the end of the Second World War, the First World Abaca Conference was held at the Manila Hotel. The conference was convened to discuss the problems faced by the abaca industry—production and marketing—and check the industry's further deterioration. This was the first and last world conference held on the topic, for the abaca industry continued to deteriorate before it finally crashed. Poor production practices and competition from synthetic fiber manufacturers were only two of the major causes of the industry's demise (DANR 1956).

The abaca industry and the Japanese immigrants in Davao in the 1920s and 1930s certainly belong to the past. Precisely for this reason, we need to reconstruct their history by retelling the stories of the Japanese *and* the Filipinos who played a role in it. For reasons that are expounded below, the story of the Japanese and the abaca industry became the popular subject of the postwar literature on Davao. But in order to construct a history that is relatively accurate and complete, the story of Filipino settlers must be included. In this article we explore the reasons behind the proliferation of writings about the Japanese in Davao, allow the Filipino presence to surface and, toward the conclusion, identify the Filipino settlers' share in Davao's development. As we present a more nuanced history, we hope that the prevailing impression that the Japanese developed prewar Davao will be modified.

Literature on Davao: Framing Narratives of Development

As seen in the news and government reports, published books, and memoirs that are examined in this article, whether written in Japanese or English or whether written by Japanese, American, or Filipino, the main actor in the development of Davao was the Japanese. In Japanese-language writings on migration, or English-language publications on Davao, the Japanese were at the forefront. The postwar scholarly literature, composed of extant writings of the 1900s to the 1940s as primary sources, echoed to a certain extent the view of these source materials that the Japanese developed Davao.¹

Population of Davao Province by nationality, 1903, 1918, 1939

NATIONALITY	1903		1918		1939	
	NUMBER	PERCENT	NUMBER	PERCENT	NUMBER	PERCENT
Filipinos*	65,423	99.89	102,221	94.45	270,823	92.56
Japanese	0	0.00	4,920	4.55	17,888	6.11
Chinese	19	0.03	874	0.81	3,595	1.23
Americans	16	0.02	96	0.09	112	0.04
Spaniards	31	0.05	51	0.05	52	0.02
British	1	0.00	49	0.05	21	0.01
Others	6	0.01	11	0.01	109	0.04
Total	65,496	100.00	108,222	100.00	292,600	100.00

*Includes indigenous and migrant populations

Sources: US Bureau of the Census 1905, 284; Census Office of the Philippine Islands 1920, 99–100, 352, 901; Commission of the Census 1940a, 1:6

An examination of these writings of the first half of the twentieth century presents several puzzles, which this article aims to clarify. If the Japanese were considered the major actors in Davao's development, certainly a laudable achievement, why did the government in Manila take courses of action that curtailed their activities? If these actions were taken because the Japanese presence and economic activities in Davao were inimical to Filipino interests, why then were they described in the extant literature as the developers—rather than as the exploiters or corrupters—of Davao? Majority of the abaca plantations were owned and operated by Filipinos and majority of the workers were Filipinos; why then were Filipinos not mentioned as having performed significant roles in Davao's development? If the allegations about Filipinos acting as dummies were true, and if indeed some Filipinos played the role of dummies in Davao's development, how do we now assess this role?

We propose to answer these questions by organizing the narratives of Davao's development into several frames, which can be viewed in chronological order. This adaptation of the original frame analysis of Erving Goffman (1974) follows the same line that other scholars have pursued in interpreting, paraphrasing, and utilizing his original idea. According to Thomas J. Scheff (2005), such liberty taken by later scholars is due in part to the lack of clarity of Goffman's original idea.

One interpretation is by Robert M. Entman (1993, 52), who writes: "To frame is to *select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more*

salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described." Another interpretation is given by Todd Gitlin (1980, 6; cited in Scheff 2005, 369) who, in paraphrasing the definition of frame, writes: "Frames are principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters." Scheff (2005, 369) elaborates: "frames are indispensable for communication; they are the scaffolds for *any* credible stories."

The lack of clarity in the concept of frame analysis has not prevented scholars from using it in their specific areas of interest. Stephen Adair (1996) applied it to his study of antinuclear protests. James N. Druckman (2001) used it to show the limits of framing by elites in influencing public opinion. And Pamela Brandwein (2006) has employed it to study what she calls "careers" of supposedly correct interpretations of legal statements. In the same vein, this article applies frame analysis to study the literature dealing with the role of Japanese immigrants in Davao's development. In doing so, it relies on Gitlin and Entman's definitions of frame. Thus, in this article "frame" refers to selective written perceptions of reality that are communicated with the purpose of emphasizing particular or specific events, themes, or issues. In viewing these frames in chronological order, we retain the salient perception of a given historical period, as we connect it to the next historical period. In this way we believe we can explain why the Japanese settlers were written about while the Filipinos were not. We get to understand why the Japanese were given the privileged position in such representations. In the end we add our own frame that covers the Filipino settlers.²

Furthermore, guided by the concept of frames, we realize that the chronological order has to be combined with an alternative categorization. In this article the extant literature is categorized as to their being written in Japanese or English, in order to understand the perspectives of the audience for whom they were written. To arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the role of Filipino settlers in the history and growth of Davao in relation to the activities of the Japanese in the same locale, we look at Japanese-language and English-language publications on Davao during the first half of the twentieth century, especially during the 1930s, and consider these primary sources. On the one hand, Japanese writers produced the Japanese-language texts primarily for a Japanese audience, who could be residing either in Japan

or in the Philippines. On the other hand, the English-language publications, written by Americans and Filipinos under colonial rule, were meant for a Philippine-based audience.

Evidently both Japanese and English language texts were much influenced by the American rhetoric of “progress and development,” a pioneer narrative that connected the two perspectives. In this light, we have made the distinction between the pioneer narrative and the nationalist narrative, both of which pervaded the period of study. The former was found largely in American-connected sources, while the latter was apparent among Filipino writers. Between the 1900s and the 1920s these two narratives existed distinct from, yet parallel to, each other. The write-ups on the frontiers of Mindanao in general and Davao in particular fell within the pioneer-development narrative, while writings in the nationalist tradition of politics were produced in the more settled areas of Luzon and the Visayas. The two narratives collided in Davao in the 1930s with the so-called Davao Land Problem, which we discuss further below.

A Brief Background

Upon the establishment of the American civil government at the turn of the twentieth century, the government of the Moro Province encouraged discharged US Army soldiers to settle in Mindanao. Thirty-odd soldiers were among the first proprietors of hemp and coconut plantations in Davao, then a district of the Moro Province (Gleeck 1974, 222). In 1907 American-owned plantations numbered up to twenty-seven, which in two years increased to forty, each one around 100 hectares in size (Gleeck 1993a, 85; Corcino 1997, 48). By 1909 abaca was the product that attracted American settlers to Davao, their number reaching over 5,000 (Abinales 2000, 78).

The American colonists needed laborers to work on their plantations; for this purpose they usually tapped the indigenous non-Christian tribes such as the Bagobo, Manobo, and Tagacaolo. They employed Japanese laborers too. In the 1900s American colonial officials had encouraged Japanese immigration to the Philippines because of the need for laborers in government projects such as the Kennon (originally Benguet) Road in northern Luzon and the newly opened American-owned plantations in Mindanao (Jose 2007, 12; Goodman 1967, 91). In 1903 some Japanese working on the construction of the Kennon Road decided to transfer to

Davao. As the road neared completion, more Japanese laborers opted to move to Davao instead of returning to Japan.

Thus, in the early years of the opening of Davao to investors and prospectors, indigenous tribes and the Japanese supplied labor, which however was insufficient and irregular. To meet the demand for manpower the government of the Moro Province exerted efforts to attract more workers from Luzon and the Visayas (Gowing 1977, 189, 291). Journals advertised the abundance of land waiting to be opened up. They presented bright prospects in the cultivation of abaca, which soon became the magnet that pulled laborers, merchants, professionals, and investors to Davao. By the end of the 1930s Filipinos, mostly from the Visayas, numbered around 270,000 (Commission of the Census 1940a, 1:6).

The number of Japanese laborers also increased gradually, and the labor they supplied became more stable. By the 1920s, they were already being recruited directly from Japan, instead of from Manila or Benguet province. The abaca they produced was bought by Japan whose position in world trade had improved due to weak competition from American and European traders in the aftermath of the First World War. Moreover, from the mid-1920s, not even the fluctuations in the price of abaca in the world market affected the influx of Japanese laborers to Davao. They just continued to come in large numbers, adding to the number of those who came ahead and had decided to stay with their local wives and children. An estimated 20,000 Japanese were in Davao by the 1930s (Jose 1996, 69).

Moreover, many Japanese migrants were able to acquire land through cohabitation with indigenous women. The local wives of Japanese, as long as they were not legally married to the Japanese and therefore retained Filipino citizenship, could purchase land parcels up to sixteen hectares, according to the Public Land Law of 1903. Japanese who formed corporations were able to purchase land areas up to 1,024 hectares (Hayase 1984, 214–25). The number of Japanese plantations in Davao jumped from four in 1911 to sixty-nine by 1918 (*ibid.*, 155). The most influential and successful of these Japanese plantations were the Ohta Development Company, founded in 1906, and the Furukawa Plantation Company, founded in 1914 (*ibid.*, 136, 155). Furukawa Plantation's first piece of land was the Burchfield Plantation, one of the first American plantations in Davao (Corcino 1997, 53). This sale to the Japanese was significant because it was an indication that the American pioneers could not sustain their efforts to develop the abaca

industry, a point that, as is explained below, contributed to the proliferation of literature, written no less by Americans, about the role of the Japanese in the development of the abaca industry.

Many more American colonists sold their plantations to the Japanese and went back to the United States, especially after the passage of the Jones Law in 1916, which promised eventual Philippine independence, and the US involvement in the First World War in 1917 (Saniel 1966, 105). Out of the 5,000 Americans in Davao between 1906 and 1909, only around eighty had remained by the 1920s (Abinales 2000, 78; Gleeck 1993b, 92).

From the 1920s through the 1940s, Davao was a success story. It became known internationally as the source of Manila hemp. As mentioned above, Japanese laborers and investors were described as the actors who made this growth possible.

With the development of Davao and the improvement of the lives of the Japanese settlers came the growing tendency of the government in Manila to protect the domestic economy from foreign influence, particularly from the Chinese and the Japanese. Such protectionism, or nationalism as the politicians in Manila would like to call it, was expressed in restrictive laws on land ownership and use and on immigration. In 1919 a new Public Land Law (Act 2874) was passed, stating that “no individual or corporation could purchase or lease land unless sixty-one percent of the capital stock was owned by a United States or Philippine citizen” (Philippine Legislature 1919).

By 1930, as a result of the new public land law, Filipino-owned corporations had become the most numerous in Davao at 106, followed by 60 Japanese, 24 Americans, 13 Chinese, and 1 Spanish corporation (Quiason 1958, 221). Because the law was not applied retroactively, the foreign-owned corporations (except the American ones) were those that already existed before the law was passed in 1919. However, there were allegations that majority of the Filipino-owned corporations had Filipino stockholders who were mere dummies of the Japanese (Guerrero 1966, 35).

In June 1935 the secretary of the Department of Agriculture and Commerce (DAC) declared that the commonly used and locally named *pakyaw* (bulk or wholesale) system was similar to a sublease and therefore a violation of the Public Land Law of 1919—highlighting in the national consciousness the “Davao Land Problem” or simply the “Davao Problem.” The *pakyaw* system, in effect since the early 1900s, was an agreement between

landowners, majority of whom were Filipinos, and labor contractors, majority of whom were Japanese, whereby the Japanese contractor provided capital and labor to cultivate abaca and paid a certain percentage of the sale of the harvest to the landowner. This was the basic system, although the steps in the process of abaca production, from planting abaca to transporting the harvest to auction houses, were done in a variety of ways (Jose 1999, 182; JPL Papers [n.d.], Jose Diaz Folder).

The Anti-Dummy Law was passed in May 1939. It aimed to punish Filipinos who allowed their names to be used in exchange for financial rewards by foreigners, particularly Chinese and Japanese, who otherwise would not be able to buy or lease land themselves. May 1940 saw the passage of the Immigration Law, which limited the annual quota of foreigners who could enter the Philippines to 500 per country.

The Public Land Law of 1919, the 1935 declaration of the *pakyaw* system as illegal, the Anti-Dummy Law of 1939, and the Immigration Law of 1940 did not stop the Japanese from whatever they were doing before these laws were passed. Neither did these laws deter some Filipinos from becoming “dummies.”

Major Writings on Davao in Japanese

Japanese authors have written about the development of Davao within several frames. From the beginning of the twentieth century up to the 1940s the large frame highlighted Davao as the best place for the Manila hemp industry to flourish and, therefore, the best migration destination for the Japanese. For migrants who had even just a modicum of capital, the best industry to invest in was that of hemp. For migrants who had no capital, the abaca plantations were the best place to work in and earn cash to later on invest in the industry or send back to Japan.

Within this large frame were smaller frames containing the dominant themes that prevailed in particular years or periods from 1900 to 1940. Up to the early 1930s, most of the writings described Davao’s rich natural resources, fertile lands without hands to till them, perfect weather for the cultivation of abaca, local cultural minorities who were hospitable to Japanese, and other characteristics meant to attract Japanese migrants to Davao. From around the mid-1930s up to the 1940s, the dominant frame was how Japanese capital and labor made Davao the source of the world’s best hemp, how the Philippine newspapers’ reports of alleged illegal activities of the Japanese

were destroying such contribution, and how the Philippine Commonwealth government was threatening to hinder this development through restrictive laws.

Initial Frame: Davao as Destination of Japanese Migrants

From around 1915 up to the 1920s the more vivid picture was that of Davao as a destination of Japanese migrant laborers and investors. A number of writers mentioned the potential of the abaca industry in the hands of Japanese migrants, but the idea did not become dominant until the 1930s. The Nan'yo Kyokai (South Seas Association), which was founded in 1915 by influential politicians, businessmen, and bureaucrats who advocated the southern expansion of the Japanese, published the journal called *Nan'yo Kyokai Kaiho*, which carried numerous articles about Davao as an ideal destination for Japanese immigrants. An article written by Kichisaburo Miyama (1915), a technical expert in the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce, was only one of such writings: as early as 1915, he had singled out the Davao abaca industry as the sector where Japanese labor migrants could be successful even without learning the local language, for they would be working with fellow Japanese.

Articles about incidents indicating what the Japanese writers described as anti-Japanese feeling belonged to a different slant. Examples of these incidents were the killing of Japanese by Bagobo and Moro, the Public Land Law of 1919, and the prohibition of Japanese doctors from engaging in medical practice in Davao (Itakura 1919, 1920). Even such genre, however, was written not to discourage the Japanese from going to Davao but to call the attention of the Japanese government to protect Japanese immigrants.

Journalists and travelers also wrote about Davao as an ideal destination for migrants. An article in the daily *Mainichi Shimbun* (Mainichi Newspaper) enticed the youth of Shinshu Village in Shinano Prefecture (present-day Nagano Prefecture) to go to Davao and establish a life of comfort and wealth (Nakamura 1916, 1917). Senkichi Kobayashi (1920) published his travelogue and identified Manila and Davao as the places where Japanese immigrants were most successful, emphasizing that in the Philippines, unlike in other parts of Southeast Asia, the Japanese did not face stiff competition from overseas Chinese.

Second Frame: Davao Land Problem and Japanese Contribution to Davao

From the 1930s to the 1940s the literature emphasized Japanese success in Davao, pride in this achievement, and disappointment and anger with

the Philippine government's efforts to curtail Japanese success. Among the writers were those who were directly involved in the abaca industry in Davao, such as Kichiemon Masaki, director of the Ohta Development Company and president of the Davao Japanese Club. Whether verbally or in writing, they claimed that Davao owed its development to the Japanese (Gakuto Shisei Kai 1935, 74–82).

The writers pointed out that agriculture in Davao was the most advanced in the *nanyo* (literally, the South Seas, but this term should be taken to mean any area south of Japan). They also emphasized that the development of agriculture began only upon the arrival of a large number of Japanese immigrants (Chiyoda Tsushin 1936, 15).

Several publications of the Firipin Kyokai (an all-Japanese association based in Japan)³ claimed that when the Japanese first went to Davao it was nothing but wilderness, a great contrast with what it has become in the 1940s, when it was the biggest exporter of Manila hemp in the world. The writers then attributed this change to the Japanese (e.g., Sato 1941, 328).

Koji Kamohara's (1938) book on the contributions of the Japanese to the development of Davao, published in 1938, became the basic source for those who wanted to write about Japanese immigration to Davao. At the time of the book's writing, Japanese migrants in Davao were being accused of violating the Philippine Public Land Law of 1919. This allegation, its mass media coverage in Manila, and the reactions of the Japanese to it comprised what was known as the "Davao Problem." Kamohara vividly described the problem and the reaction of Japanese legislators in Tokyo. Offering his own observation, Kamohara wrote that the allegations about the Japanese were only legalistic strategies of the Philippine government to check the rise of Japanese economic power. He also pointed out that the Japanese government should not fail to help Japanese migrants to prove that the allegations were wrong because such failure would result in the death of Japan's southward advance policy (ibid., 420–27).

Zentoku Nakahara represented a journalistic treatment of the challenge presented by the Philippine government to the Japanese in Davao. He was the publisher of *Tropical Post* in Tokyo and considered by the Japanese as a journalist who had a good appreciation of Philippine conditions (Goodman 1983, 37). According to Nakahara (1941, 138), Filipino politicians did not have a good grasp of how hardworking the Japanese were because these politicians believed that Filipino settlers in Mindanao could easily succeed

as the Japanese did. To Nakahara (ibid., 140), Filipino landowners and lawyers had become rich because of their Japanese clients, and yet, not recognizing their debt to the Japanese, there was now a move to hinder Japanese progress.

Arranged chronologically the frames of Japanese narratives about Davao's development began with the emphasis on Davao as an ideal destination for Japanese migrants and ended with that of the Japanese having developed Davao, a frame that served as a reaction to the Davao land problem. In the 1940s and 1960s retrospective literature, these two frames of migration and the Davao land problem were accompanied by the theme of the Japanese contribution to the development of Davao. All three issues were fused together in a larger frame of the histories of the development of Davao and of Japanese immigration to Davao.

The Large Frame: Japanese Migrants and the Development of Davao

The dominance of the frame that presented Davao as an ideal destination for Japanese migrants during the early twentieth century is attested by an ethics book intended for Japanese elementary school children and published by the Japanese Ministry of Education in 1943. The book mentioned Kyosaburo Ohta (1876–1917), who first went to Manila in 1901 and set up a business to import Japanese merchandise. In 1905 he moved to Davao, where he became the first Japanese immigrant to buy a piece of land and successfully establish the Ohta Development Company. Until the outbreak of the Second World War it remained one of the most successful Japanese corporations in Davao, producing Manila hemp and employing Japanese and Filipino laborers, although it preferred Japanese laborers. The book extolled Ohta as a model for the Japanese in order for Japan to expand its influence to the world (Jose 1999, 14–16; cf. Mombusho 1943, 74–81).

Another evidence of the dominance of the frame highlighting Davao as an ideal place for Japanese migrants was the memoir written by Seitaro Kanegae, who immigrated to Manila in 1909 and became an influential adviser to the Japanese military in the Philippines during the Japanese occupation (1942–1945). Kanegae (1968) reiterated the conclusion advanced by majority of Japanese observers in the 1930s that Davao became the world's largest exporter of Manila hemp because of Japanese capital and labor.

The ethics book and Kanegae's memoir conflated the history of Japanese immigration to Davao and the history of the abaca industry's development. They presented large frames that included the smaller initial frames.

Major Writings on Davao in English

Through the years, writings on Davao in English emphasized its progress from a frontier town to a modern city. This theme of development constituted the large frame that encompassed two smaller ones. One frame, which covered the 1930s and 1940s, emphasized the contribution of the Japanese to the development of Davao. The other frame, covering the same period, underscored the theme that the Japanese were a threat to Philippine national interests.

The Large Frame of Development

In the early decades of the twentieth century American administrators, who envisaged Davao and the whole of the Moro Province as their "last western frontier" or "the land of the Farthest East and the Nearest West," encouraged the settlement of the area, preferably by Americans or Europeans (US War Department 1905, 2; *Mindanao Herald* 1909). Articles in the *American Chamber of Commerce Journal* (ACCJ) looked at the development of Davao as an example of pioneer success akin to the experience in the American West of bringing progress to a wilderness and "teaching industry to tribes" (Boyle 1926, 9). Likewise, in pursuit of development, Americans welcomed the Japanese to Davao upon realizing that the number of American settlers was not enough to cope with the demand for labor and capital. Accordingly the aforementioned journal consistently took note of the success of Japanese migrants throughout the 1920s and the 1930s (ibid., 8–29; ACCJ 1931, 7; ACCJ 1936, 10). Similarly Filipinos writing for the *Philippine Journal of Commerce* wrote positively about the economic progress of Davao and the modern production processes employed by the Japanese in the hemp industry (Alvarez 1934, 6; Estuar 1937a, 18; 1937b, 11–12).

Stories on Filipino settlers started to surface in the 1930s. The *Graphic* featured a group of "pioneer" Filipino schoolteachers who became "wealthy landowners" in Davao (Gabila 1934), while the *Tribune* (1939a, 17–28), carried a special supplement with Davao's phenomenal growth as the pervading theme of the articles. Capitalists from Luzon and the Visayas were encouraged to "speed up the progress of Mindanao"

(ibid., 17). Leading residents of Davao were featured in stories of success in agricultural and commercial ventures, some of them having learned from the Japanese (Dakudao 1939, 24; *Tribune* 1939b, 1939c). These stories about Filipino individuals were few and far between, even if they were the most numerous inhabitants of both the province and city of Davao. Also lacking were published diaries and memoirs written by Filipino settlers.⁴ Moreover, for the handful of journalistic features on Filipino settlers, the focus was on individual success stories rather than on the settlers' collective role in the growth of Davao, which was explicit in accounts on Japanese migrants.

Typical of the disconnection between Filipino settlers and their role in Davao's development was the piece Filipino journalist Modesto Farolan (1935) wrote on the controversial subject of the Public Land Law of 1919 in the context of the "Davao Problem." Farolan praised the Japanese contribution to Davao's economic progress. Although he acknowledged the ability of Filipino settlers to succeed in Davao with suitable government assistance and encouragement, he criticized the Filipinos' lack of self-discipline and the government's lack of coordination (ibid., 41–42).

Focus on the Japanese

News about Davao in the 1930s, such as those found in the widely circulated American-owned but Filipino-staffed *Philippines Free Press* (1930, 4; 1931, 44) inevitably focused on the Japanese. In the background of these stories were the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and the Sino–Japanese War of 1937, while at the foreground was the boom of Davao's abaca industry with Japanese labor and capital.

Consequently journalists were divided in their assessment of the Japanese presence in Davao. Some gave the Japanese credit for their contribution to the development of the hemp industry, while others begrudged their success and interpreted their activities in Davao as a form of Japanese expansionism. Still others described them as illegal settlers and cultivators (e.g., *PFP* 1930, 4; Navas 1930a, 4; 1930b, 10; Barranco 1931, 2; *PFP* 1939, 52). Through this frame on the Japanese, the aforementioned Davao supplement of the *Tribune* could be understood as a reaction to the "Davao Problem," and thus featured Filipino success stories in Davao alongside the Japanese.

Adding the Filipino Frame to the Gallery of Narratives

Although the Japanese dominated the abaca industry in Davao before the Second World War, population-wise they comprised one of the minorities in Davao. Filipinos comprised the majority, most of them laborers although some were professionals and businessmen. As settlers from Luzon and the Visayas, they brought with them ambition, ability, and a fair amount of wealth. What did these Filipinos contribute to the development of the abaca industry?

Few Filipinos contributed capital out of the money they saved from the practice of their professions in Davao (Magallanes 2011, 134–36). They applied for land while still employed in their professions and upon retirement devoted themselves full time to agriculture (Dabbay 1995, 108, 110, 112–13, 123; Salanga 1985). Among them were Cipriano Villafuerte Sr., Casiano Salas, Juan Sarenas, and Rufina Tudtod.

Lt. Cipriano Villafuerte Sr. was a migrant from Luzon who moved to Davao with his wife in the early 1900s and obtained land in Calinan through a sales application (JPL Papers [n.d.], C. Villafuerte folder). He planted abaca and coconut in his land with the help of Japanese laborers and initiated the building of roads, trails, and bridges in the wilderness (Dabbay 1995, 116). Casiano Salas, an engineer assigned as surveyor to Davao in 1914, was a native of Bohol and educated at the University of the Philippines in Manila. He resigned in 1927 from government service to become a private surveyor. He later bought lands in Bunawan, north of Davao town, where he hired Japanese laborers to work on his farm, planting abaca and ramie (ibid., 120).

Juan Sarenas was a lawyer from Nueva Ecija who, together with his wife, settled in Davao in 1916. He applied for large tracts of public land and became a landowner, rising to the post of governor of Davao from 1931 to 1933 (ibid., 114). He was one of the lawyers of the Furukawa Plantation Company and other Japanese companies. He had a majority stake in the Southern Cross Plantation Co., Inc., which was originally owned by American pioneers who encountered labor scarcity until Sarenas and his Japanese partners took over (Goodman 1967, 104; Corcino 1997, 57).

Finally, there was merchant Rufina Tudtod who left Cebu for Davao in 1917 to put up a *sari-sari* (variety) store along Calle Magallanes, one of the town's three major streets. She got her start-up capital from selling an inherited property in Cebu amounting to approximately P300. After nearly

a year of operating the convenience store, she opened another store with a capital of P3,000, selling wine and general merchandise in Toril, about six kilometers from the town and site of the Furukawa plantation. During that period she applied to purchase a piece of land. After six years, she sold the Toril store and with her accumulated earnings of P20,000 started operating her own farm (JPL Papers [n.d.], R. Tudtod folder).

More than other nationalities Filipinos were plantation owners because the Public Land Law of 1919 limited landownership to Filipinos and Americans. By 1930, with over a decade of implementation of the Public Land Law, 106 plantations were under the name of Filipino owners. This figure compared favorably with 24 owned by Americans, 62 by Japanese, 13 by Chinese, and 1 by a Spaniard (Quiason 1958, 221), with the latter three nationalities having obtained their lands before the passage in 1919 of the Public Land Law. In 1939 the Census of the Philippines reported that Filipinos operated 277,288 hectares of agricultural lands; Americans, 7,625 hectares; and Japanese, 41,324 hectares (Commission of the Census 1940b, 3:650). Some Filipino plantation owners had partner-owners, usually their relatives. These partner-owners were usually non-Davao residents, but their money helped augment the financial resources needed to acquire land parcels and operate plantations (Magallanes 2004; Garchitorena 1947).

Owning land, particularly agricultural land, became significant only when the lots had been cultivated and made productive. The more important question, therefore, was how these Filipino plantation owners made their land productive. Faced with meager capital, lack of knowledge about abaca cultivation, and labor shortage, they entered into several types of partnership with the Japanese. The latter provided expertise, capital, and labor. Indeed, if contemporary lawsuits and journalistic accounts would be believed, many of the purchases of agricultural lands by Filipinos were financed by the Japanese, thus making Filipinos the “dummy” owners of these properties. There were cases of Japanese corporations facilitating and paying for the preliminary survey of the land, and all that the Filipino or American owner had to do was apply for a lease with the privilege of purchase (ACCJ 1930, 27). A number of Filipinos entered into joint-venture agreements with large Japanese corporations such as the Ohta Development Company and the Furukawa Plantation. The Filipino partner would set up a corporation using funds provided by the Japanese partner. The big corporations would provide these smaller Filipino-Japanese corporations

loans for agricultural implements, machine, merchandise, and so on (House of Representatives 1932, 6). The Japanese partner would also take care of marketing the corporations’ hemp to international buyers (Abinales 2000, 83). Other Filipino and American landowners either leased or entered into a landowner–labor arrangement with the Japanese. As alleged by the Department of Agriculture and Commerce in 1935, there were 29,252 hectares of public land applied for by Filipinos and Americans, which were then turned over to the Japanese for development under lease or landowner–labor contracts (Hayden 1942, 718).

Many Filipino landowners entered into a landowner–labor arrangement, the *pakyaw* system, with Japanese contractors in order to meet the need for capital and labor. In this arrangement the Japanese contractor provided both capital and labor. He shouldered the expenses for the wages of laborers, the stripping machine and its maintenance, petroleum, and the lubricating oil used to run the machine. He also paid for the hospitalization of workers in case they were injured on the job (JPL Papers [n.d.], S. Dakudao folder). The Japanese contractors hired Japanese as well as Filipino laborers to clear the land of trees and shrubbery, plow the land, plant abaca, keep the soil free of weeds, harvest the abaca stalks, and strip the abaca fiber. It was a wholesale (hence the word “*pakyaw*”) agreement for the Japanese contractor to do all that had to be done to produce hemp—from land clearing to fiber stripping. On his or her part, the Filipino landowner received from 10 to 15 percent of the sale of the harvest, the remainder going to the Japanese contractor as profit. If the land was already cleared, the landowner’s share went up to 30 or 40 percent (JPL Papers [n.d.], Jose Diaz folder).

Depending on the variation of landowner–labor arrangement, the Filipino landowner had a role beyond providing the land. In some arrangements, he was the one to sell the hemp at the weekly auction and pay the Japanese contractor his share (Garchitorena 1947). In other arrangements, the Japanese contractor sold the hemp and all the landowner had to do was receive his share of the sale (JPL Papers [n.d.], H. B. Hughes folder). In isolated plantations the Japanese contractor was also obligated to build roads, but road maintenance was the responsibility of the landowner (Dakudao Plantation 1939).

Filipinos provided labor to the abaca industry. In the early 1930s they comprised at least 60 percent of the workforce (PFP 1931, 44). The 1939 Philippine census reported 33,800 Filipino laborers in abaca farms—while

there were only 3,028 abaca farm laborers who were Japanese (Commission of the Census 1940a, 1:28). Filipino laborers worked in large plantations as well as in smaller-sized homesteads. They served under Filipino contractors (called *capataz*) as well as Japanese contractors. In one plantation there were about 150 Japanese laborers and around 500 Filipinos working for a Japanese contractor (Dakudao [n.d.]). Furukawa Plantation Company, for example, employed only 12 Japanese, 20 Christian Filipinos, and 10 Muslim Filipinos (Furukawa 1938, 51).

However, as Farolan (1935) pointed out, Filipinos were not known to always do a good job. They cut the abaca plants irregularly, causing damage to the longevity of the plant and its future quality (JPL Papers [n.d.], Hijo Plantation Co. folder). Some Filipino contractors maintained satisfactory performance for a short period, but would slacken as the weeks went by. Some plantation owners who initially hired Filipino laborers ended up losing money in the venture, and so shifted to hiring Japanese contractors thereafter (JPL Papers [n.d.], F. vda. de Suarez folder). In contrast, Japanese contractors were observed to be methodical. They subdivided the lots into manageable parcels and allowed laborers in only after the needed road was built (Dakudao [n.d.]). This enabled the laborers to work at their optimum capacity, with shelter amenities already available when they started clearing the forested land. Planting the abaca was also done in a precise manner to maximize space. The 3-meter distance between plants provided enough sunlight, water, and nutrients from the soil to allow the plants to grow healthy. After planting the abaca, continual weeding was done to prevent nutrient loss.

Nonetheless, a few Filipino laborers rose to become farm owners. In Digos-Padada, south of Davao town, laborers in American and Japanese corporations were later on able to buy their own land with their savings and become farmer-owners (Simkins and Wernstedt 1971, iii, 43–44, 75). The story of Alejandro Fernandez from Iloilo is an example of the laborer-to-owner narrative. Upon migrating to Davao in 1914, Fernandez first worked in an acquaintance's homestead. He saved his wages to apply for his own homestead in 1916, while continuing to work in the other homestead. With money saved from his wages and his own homestead, Fernandez applied in 1927 to purchase a bigger tract of land and thus doubled his earnings from abaca and copra (JPL Papers [n.d.], statement of A. Fernandez, Hijo Plantation Co. Folder).

In many cases, there were also laborers who opted to remain wage earners. Due to the relatively high wages in Davao and the agreeable labor conditions in the plantations, many laborers were content to remain laborers and did not apply for homestead or file any public land applications (JPL Papers [n.d.], Statement of V. Pepito, Hijo Plantation Co. folder). Moreover, the tedious process of land application and the cash outlay involved could have discouraged poor and uneducated laborers from attaining landowner status. In the early 1930s there were “hundreds of poor laborers” living in Santa Cruz without land of their own (JPL Papers [n.d.], Beatriz Gutierrez folder). In 1936 an estimated 25,000 laborers and bodega clerks in Davao worked primarily in the abaca industry (Department of Labor 1937, 172). Available data for 1933 showed that only 12,030 applied for homestead in Davao, while the number of sale and lease applicants were considerably lower at 1,564 and 1,015, respectively, yielding a total of only 14,609 public land applicants (Bureau of Lands 1934). Extrapolating from these given figures between 1933 and 1936, and assuming a one-to-one ratio of applicants to applications, we offer a rough estimate of at least 40 percent of laborers in prewar Davao who remained landless.

Finally, among the Filipino contributors to Davao's development were the lawyers, the most famous among them being no less than Jose P. Laurel, who during the Japanese Occupation became the president of the Second Philippine Republic. These lawyers acted as counsels for the Japanese. The Japanese corporations needed lawyers—some of whom were based in Manila while many were based in Davao—to prepare and put in order the legal requirements of corporations. They needed lawyers who could explain to them the laws of the Philippines, especially the land laws, and represent them during investigations conducted by the national government on Japanese holdings (Gleeck 1993b, 101; Garcia 2005, 75). Given the complicated and bureaucratic system of doing business in Davao at this time, it was unimaginable for a Japanese investor to operate in Davao without the help of Filipino lawyers.

What then was the place of Filipinos in the development of the abaca industry in Davao? First and foremost, they provided the much needed labor. Second, the Filipino plantation owners made land available to Japanese and Filipino capitalists for the cultivation of abaca; those who entered into joint ventures with large corporations further enlarged their landholdings to cultivate abaca. And, third, Filipino lawyers provided much needed legal advice.

The Japanese and, to a certain extent, the Americans framed the development of the abaca industry by focusing on the Japanese, without whose capital, labor, and expertise the industry, according to their frames, would not have developed. Now that we have constructed the Filipino frame, it can be said that, without the Filipino laborers who were greater in number than the Japanese, the plantations would have suffered from labor shortage. Without the cooperation of Filipino landowners, the Japanese capitalists would not have had land to till. Without Filipino lawyers, the Japanese would have been at a loss as to how to comply with Philippine laws.

Conclusion: Japanese Visibility, Filipino Invisibility

The invisibility of the Filipino compared to the Japanese and the question of “who developed Davao?” are two sides of one coin since most of the literature produced in the first half of the twentieth century were on the “progress and development” of Davao, as influenced by American rhetoric. Several reasons account for the greater emphasis placed on Japanese contributions to Davao’s development than on the Filipino contributions. First, the presence of the Japanese in Davao was part of Japan’s campaign to encourage the Japanese to go to foreign countries and seek their fortune there for their own economic benefit as well as Japan’s national development. Migration to countries south of Japan was part of this campaign, which intensified in the 1920s and 1930s. Such a campaign naturally included numerous newspaper and journal articles about it. And since it was a government policy supported by individuals who advocated the southward advance of Japan, not surprisingly there were plenty of books written about the Japanese in Davao. Second, the “Davao Problem” made the Japanese defensive about their situation in Davao. Their desire to justify their presence and economic activities in Davao found expression in newspaper and journal articles.

The “Davao Problem” is also why the literature written by the Japanese in the 1930s emphasized that they were the developers of Davao’s abaca industry and by extension the developers of Davao. Most of the articles in the 1930s and early 1940s were written to denounce explicitly and implicitly the Public Land Law, the illegalization of the pakyaw system, and the Immigration Law as irrational and against the mutual interest of Japanese and Filipinos. To show the law’s irrationality they had to claim that, without the Japanese, the abaca industry would not have developed the way it had. To show that the laws were for the mutual interest of the Japanese

and the Filipinos, Japanese writings emphasized the positive theme of the development of Davao by the Japanese, rather than the negative theme of the Japanese exploitation of Philippine resources and corruption of Filipino landowners and government officials.

Moreover, the advocates—mostly politicians and journalists in Manila—of the land law, the immigration law, the anti-dummy law, and the measure to declare the pakyaw system illegal accounted for the Japanese dominance of Davao’s economy as a major factor why such laws were needed. Even though these Manila-based politicians and journalists considered such dominance as inimical to national interests, and claimed that Japanese profits were sent to Japan, they unwittingly created the impression that the Japanese were the major actors in Davao’s development.

The Americans, for their part, wrote about the Japanese to defend them from what they perceived as nationalistic and anti-alien laws and measures passed by Filipino politicians. It is not hard to understand why the Americans defended the Japanese, if we put their stand in the context of their desire to develop their investments in Davao, and if we take into consideration that there were not many American settlers in Davao. We have to be reminded too that most of the pioneer Americans in Davao had sold their lands to the Japanese. The Americans who still had plantations in Davao employed many Japanese contractors and laborers (Gohn and Sarenas [1935?]). They preferred Japanese to Filipinos because of the prejudiced impression they had of Filipino managers and laborers.

In contrast, most of the Filipino landowners did not write about their situation because they did not have to. Situated in Davao, far from the politics of Manila, they could go on with their lives without being too worried about the allegations that they were “dummies” of the Japanese or that they were illegally leasing their land to the Japanese (Dacudao 2008, 133). Indeed, not even Jose P. Laurel, a man of letters who had written his memoirs and published essays about politics and Philippines–Japan relations, wrote about Davao and the Filipinos there. He did not have to defend his Japanese and Filipino clients in public, for his law firm had been defending them effectively in the local courts. In fact, as can be seen in the citations in this article, the Filipino frame in the narratives of Davao’s development has been constructed by relying mainly on the archives of these court cases.

Farolan (1935, 6) did praise the Filipinos as “the ones that have done wonders in Davao and the rest of Mindanao, almost unaided” by the

government, but it was done as an introduction to the contribution of the Japanese to Philippine economic development and as a foil for the failings of the Philippine government to develop Davao. At the height of the “Davao Problem,” Filipino settlers were mentioned in the literature, but primarily as laborers who did not compare favorably with the Japanese. As landowners, they were accused of being “dummies” of the Japanese. As shareholders in corporations with Japanese capital, they were likewise labeled as “dummies.” If not called “dummies,” Filipinos were accused of subleasing their lands illegally to the Japanese.

This image of Filipinos as dummies, however, does not belong to the narratives of the development of Davao, a frontier province far from the national capital. It properly belongs to the narratives of the growth of Philippine nationalism, specifically, economic nationalism. And this nationalist narrative, told in the 1920s and 1930s, were heard more in Manila, not in Davao.

Postscript

Postwar scholars such as Sanie (1966), Guerrero (1966), and Goodman (1967), who undertook research within the institutional networks of the academe and used materials in the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, DC, and in various Philippine archives, generally echoed the contents of these materials and presented a picture that the Japanese were the primary drivers of Davao’s development.

Back in Japan, a number of the first- and second-generation Japanese who were repatriated to Japan not surprisingly wrote their memoirs with the theme of nostalgia for the paradise that was Davao, which was remembered with the “blood and sweat” they poured over the development of the abaca industry and their being victimized by the war. From around the 1980s Japanese scholars who could look at Davao with a more detached view began to write about the Japanese immigrants there in the context of Japanese migration history and the hemp industry (e.g., Hayase 1984). In the past ten or fifteen years, they have been joined by scholars who have focused on the Nikkeijin, the descendants of Japanese immigrants, and their present position in Philippine society (e.g., Ohno 1991). This body of literature presents a more complex picture, but on some pages there are still references to the Japanese as the developers of Davao.

While for this article we have used almost the same archives where earlier scholars had done research, we have deliberately looked for materials on Filipino settlers in Davao. The result is a story with a different perspective. While the literature to date has focused on the Japanese and how they “developed” Davao, this article includes Filipinos in the narrative and shows that the development of the abaca industry and by extension Davao was due to a fortunate combination of land availability, capital, and labor—both foreign and local, not anchored solely on either the Japanese or the Filipinos.

Notes

- 1 Scholarly works on prewar Davao in English began to appear only after the Second World War. In these articles the subjects were the Japanese rather than the Filipinos. These articles include Quiason (1958) on the “Japanese colony in Davao”; Cody (1958, 1959) on prewar Japanese companies and daily life in Davao based on recollections of Davao inhabitants; Guerrero (1966) on Japanese businesses in the Philippines before the Second World War; Goodman (1967) on the political and diplomatic relationship between the Japanese and the Philippine colonial government; and Sanie (1966) on the social structure of the Japanese in Davao and their economic impact on Davao and the Philippines in general. Goodman (1967) and Sanie (1966) depicted a very close-knit community of Japanese settlers who were concentrated mostly in the abaca industry of Davao. Guerrero (1966) and Goodman (1967) mentioned the use of Filipinos as dummies by the Japanese to skirt around the Public Land Law of 1919. Hayase (1985b) studied the Japanese abaca industry in Davao vis-à-vis American colonial policies. Jose (1996, 1999) wrote about the Japanese perceptions of Filipinos, the Davao land problem, and other matters that caught the attention of the Japanese about the Philippines from 1900 to 1941. Abinales (2000) credited the Japanese community’s ability to work with local and national politicians in the Philippines in protecting Japanese economic interests in prewar Davao. Finally, Kaneshiro (2002) studied the remembrances of Okinawan immigrants’ work and daily lives in Davao before the Second World War.
- 2 Filipinos, indigenous peoples, and Christian settlers from Luzon and the Visayas have become subjects of published works only recently. Still, many credit the Japanese, or Filipino–Japanese partnerships, in the development of Davao. Hayase (1985a, 2007), Gloria (1987), Dabbay (1987), Corcino (1998), Tiu (2003, 2005), Garcia (2005), and Magallanes (2011) have written about the political and cultural histories of Davao, compiled indigenous myths and legends, and recorded the biographies of Philippine-born and foreign settlers who comprised the multiethnic, multinational city of Davao before the Second World War. Some explicitly deplore the loss of local traditions and to a certain extent the extinction of the indigenous tribes in the course of Davao’s settlement and development. Others implicitly blame the American and Christian–Filipino settlers for imposing their own culture on the indigenous tribes and praise the Japanese for their ability to coexist with the indigenous tribes. The few biographies of Filipino settlers, the most recent of the batch and usually written by the subject’s descendants, describe the Filipino migrant story of difficulty and success alongside the Japanese in prewar Davao.

- 3 Also called Philippine Society in English, this association should not be confused with the Philippine–Japan Society of the same period, which was based in the Philippines and had both Japanese and Filipino members.
- 4 The exceptions are the wartime diaries of Santiago P. Dakudao (n.d.), which was published by his grandson Michaelangelo Dakudao (1994), who discovered it by chance, and of Lt. Col. Anastacio Ocampo (Morales 2006).

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