

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University · Loyola Heights, Quezon City · 1108 Philippines

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Philippine Studies vol. 27, no. 3 (1979) 432–438

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Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

Review Article

Pace and Mood of a Philippine Era

VICENTE L. RAFAEL

TURN OF THE CENTURY. Planned and Produced by Gilda Cordero Fernando and Nik Ricio, Quezon City: GCF Books, 1978, 264pp.

Rarely are books on Filipiniana, here or abroad, as eventful as *Turn of the Century*. Editor/writer Gilda Cordero Fernando and art designer Nik Ricio (the same team that came up with the much-praised *Streets of Manila* in 1977) have produced a lavish and visually exciting excursion into the years between 1890 and 1910. In addition to the essays written by the likes of Nick Joaquin, Teodoro Agoncillo, Doreen Fernandez, Nicanor Tiongson and other respected scholars, the book also contains some 300 vintage photographs, many of which are reproduced for the first time. Its endpapers and margins are highlighted with art work done in the style of *art nouveau* so popular at that time.

The book offers both an overview of the crucial events and detailed descriptions of some of the day-to-day aspects of life in the Philippines at the turn of the century. Through the effective juxtaposition of visuals and texts, the book in its own unique way brings to light the complexity of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: an era of rapid change and yet of persistent, even revitalized, tradition.

Though the fourteen essays contained in the book are aimed primarily at a popular audience, the specialist will find several of them useful and even provocative. A few of the pieces tend to be of an uneven quality, as is usual in works of this kind.

The opening essay entitled "Becoming Filipino" written jointly by Teodoro Agoncillo and the late Dr. Domingo Abella is one such example. The two authors give an overview of the social classes existing in the Philippine society in the late nineteenth century and the process by which the word "Filipino" came to be applied to the majority of the country's inhabitants. But what was meant to be the key essay of the book turns out to be rather disappointing. The authors tend to downplay the inter-action between lower, middle and

upper classes as well as between rural and urban elite. Likewise, they fail to note the key role of the Chinese mestizos in the rise of a distinct Filipino national consciousness. Their description of colonial society before the nineteenth century (“. . . conditions of apartheid prevailed throughout the three hundred years of the Spanish regime. . .”, p. 15) is misleading as it makes it appear that the class structure was unchanging and stagnant before the 1880s. By pigeonholing the colony’s population into reified categories, the authors gloss over the complexity and dynamism of the social classes in the Philippines.

“Red as in Revolution” by Nick Joaquin, however, more than makes up for the preceding essay. Joaquin reacquaints the reader with the major events that led up to the revolution of 1896, the short-lived Malolos Republic, the Filipino-American war and the first tentative years of American rule. The author’s gift for sensing the mythical as encapsulated in the historical, and his ability to articulate this to the modern audience makes this essay a thoroughly stimulating piece. Bonifacio and Aguinaldo are treated not simply as historical figures, but as existential archetypes and tragic heroes to the end. In reviewing the actions of these men and those whom they led and fought, Joaquin also tries to personalize the broad sweep of events. He projects the cataclysm of war through the eyes of an actual historical figure, Castor de Jesus, and a fictional character, Maria Salome Marquez. The former was a Katipunero who kept a record of his contacts with Bonifacio from Manila to Cavite and the latter a young girl who lived through the Filipino-American war and, like many other Filipinos, found a place in the new colonial order as a school teacher.

Agoncillo’s second contribution, “Ancestral City” gives a description of the various districts of Manila and what they were famous for (e.g., Rosario for Chinese textiles, Escolta for luxury goods, and San Nicolas for soap). This well-crafted portrait of the city shows it to be one of seeming contradictions in 1900: decadent and prosperous, tranquil and bustling, decidedly Oriental and yet half Occidental. The shapes and sounds of Manila reflected – as they still do today – the operative forces in Philippine history. Well into the throes of modernization, it was moving away from the medieval grip of Spain and entering the modern world brought by America. The growing cosmopolitanism of the city may further be gleaned from the “Directory of Manila” appended to Agoncillo’s article. It features a fascinating listing of some of the inhabitants of Manila as well as their occupations which cover an impressively wide field.

The texture of day-to-day life in the Philippines is the focus of the three following essays. Doreen Fernandez’s “Merriment Mix” is a well-researched piece about the major forms of leisure available to *fin-de-siecle* Filipinos and foreigners. The exclusive clubs for Spaniards and Americans, the tertulias, bailes, zarzuelas, American and Russian circuses, French can-can dancers and

even an occasional though pathetic bullfight in Manila, all point to the growing sophistication of the country's inhabitants. The religious rituals of the past were being overlayed and at times even supplanted by more secular forms of entertainment, bespeaking important changes in the people's values. However, alongside these new modes of leisure was the strong persistence of more traditional activities like cockfighting, Lenten celebrations, moro-moro, and religious fiestas. Thus, the themes of change and continuity, as Dr. Fernandez makes clear, find expression not only in such dramatic events as revolution and war, but also in the popular culture and leisurely pursuits of the people.

In "The Low Cost of Living," Gilda Cordero Fernando diligently surveys the prices of prime goods and services in the Philippines in 1900. To the modern reader, besieged by skyrocketing inflation, it is extremely moving to read of such things as a ₱200 mansion complete with a garage and running water, first class hotel services at ₱1.50-₱2.50 a day with bath and three meals, San Miguel beer at 25¢ a bottle, and Australian beef for 40¢ a pound. A helpful listing of the types of labor and their corresponding wages is appended to the essay and shows that the salary rates of those days compared favorably with the prices of basic commodities. Equally interesting is the "Shopping Guide" consisting of a series of reproductions of advertisements for jewelers, tobacco shops, liquor stores and dry goods, among others. These indicate once again the growth of the country's commercial sector as part and parcel of the process of modernization.

Nowhere is the pace and mood of the era more readily outlined than in the "shifting silhouettes of Philippine dress." Nicanor Tiongson in "The Dressing Tradition" rigorously traces the evolution of Philippine costumes among the upper and lower classes from the last years of the nineteenth century to the early decades of the twentieth. Like an archeologist among the ruins of a complex civilization, Tiongson effectively reconstructs the inherent logic of dressing among Filipinos — that is, the rules that governed the adoption and/or abandonment of certain types of clothes and their combinations with each other. As always, these costumes reflected the social and cultural currents at work in the islands. Hence, the highly westernized elite class avidly adopted European and American fashions in the same spirit with which they sought equality with the white man. Among the lower classes, unhispanized groups in the mountains and Muslim groups in the south, dressing continued along more traditional lines. Eventually, western fashions were adopted to the climatic demands of the tropics. Though coats continued to be worn by some, the barong became increasingly popular. Similarly the terno as the standard formal attire for women grew out of the synthesis between the classic western gown and the more indigenous *baro*, *saya*, and *pañuelo*. Even among some mountain groups, trousers, coats and hats were starting to be worn, perhaps indicative of the deep inroads that western culture had made by the twentieth century.

"The Colonial School," Tiongson's second contribution, examines the educational system implemented in the country by the Spaniards and the Americans between 1863 and 1909. Tiongson's thesis is that the schools under the Spanish friars had the effect of "brutalizing" the minds of the Filipinos. These friars systematically obstructed any attempt by the insular government at reforming the educational system out of the desire to maintain their hold over the colony. American schools stood in stark contrast to the friar-dominated institutions in that these were more liberal and secular. However, like its Spanish counterpart, the American colonial school, according to the author, was but a tool in the colonial subjugation of the Filipinos. It promoted a type of "colonial mentality" among the Filipinos which in turn made possible their economic enslavement to America.

The author's nationalist sentiments provides his essay with an emotional and intellectual frame of reference. However, it leaves the thoughtful reader with a number of disturbing questions. If the Spanish friars were unmitigated in their cruelty and so thoroughly lacking in compassion, one wonders how it was possible for a distinct class of articulate ilustrados to emerge in the country and give expression to the people's nationalist longings. If the Spanish educational system was so defective, then why did the Malolos Republic retain its basic curriculum with only a few changes? If education during the American period was calculated to degrade the Filipino sensibility, then why was it so enormously popular and successful? Tiongson claims that "the over-all effect of American education was negative because it formed an unhealthy mentality that enslaved the Filipino to the American economy." Was this really the case? The Philippine economy geared toward export crop production at the turn of the century probably would have had to depend on western economy — American or British — with or without colonial education. It would therefore seem that the correlation between education and economics that the author makes, while valid to some degree, nevertheless remains equivocal and in need of qualification.

On the other hand, Felice P. Sta. Maria provides an interesting account of the racist overtones of American colonialism in "Brown Man's Burden." The essay is spiced with judicious excerpts from various sources (e.g. S.P. Meek's story of Filipinos with tails) which underline much of the ethnocentricity of the Americans who came to the islands. Confronted with the strangeness and mystery of the Philippines, a number of them, including those who were educated and urbane, retreated behind the relative comfort of cultural stereotypes. They called the natives niggers and cast them as lazy, corrupt, barbaric, treacherous, and simian. It was precisely this sort of racism that was to surface in various guises and that was to become a repeated source of irritation and conflict between Filipinos and Americans in the years to come.

But the most thought-provoking essay in the book is Nick Joaquin's second piece, "The Jesus Scene." The author begins by pointing out that the

political and military upheavals at the turn of the century coincided with a tremendous upsurge of religious activity, especially in the countryside. The spectre of revolution and the chaos that it brought represented to many Filipinos, especially among the poor, a veritable vision of the Apocalypse. Confronted with such a situation, they hastened to prepare for the millennium by rallying around charismatic and Christ-like figures and establishing utopian communities to await the "Judgement Day." Joaquin argues that such messianic figures and utopian communities were not as bizarre at the turn of the century as they may seem to us today. Rather, these movements were creative attempts on the part of their members to confront the dislocating events around them in familiar terms. These religious movements ranging from the Guardia de Honor to the Dios-Diosan and to the Santa Iglesia Movement were all the more tenable in a world steeped in religion. Filipinos in the nineteenth century lived in a world where the sacred was constantly manifest and where religious rituals were as common as breathing and as essential as food.

In the wake of the revolution this religious resurgence did not ebb. The rise of the Philippine Independent Church, the persistence of numerous colurum sects and the Iglesia ni Kristo sect (though a few years later) testify to the continued attempts of Filipinos everywhere to place a semblance of order and purpose into their lives. But the religion that proved dominant in the end was Catholicism. The secularization of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the improvement in the quality of religious instruction, and the entrance of the American Jesuits were some of the reasons that account for this. Joaquin's essay, like some of the more exciting work being done by such historians as Reynaldo Ileto and John Schumacher, S.J., brings into sharp focus the importance of religion in a people's history. Revolution, nationalism, independence — all these had strong religious undercurrents which largely explain their tremendous appeal.

The great value that Filipinos in the early 1900s placed on kinship ties is reflected by Lorna Kalaw-Tirol's "Old Fashioned Love." Since the family was seen as one of the most important institutions in Philippine society, entrance into it via courtship and marriage was governed by an elaborate and often cumbersome (by our standards) set of rituals and obligations. Women were expected to be coy and obedient, yet persevering and willing to sacrifice for their men. Chaperones were a perennial fixture during the courtship stage and parents often determined their children's match. Many of these rites of passage are of course rooted in prehispanic society, as was the concern with extending and securing kinship ties. Old fashioned love, in this sense, served as an anchor to tradition in the sea of rapid change.

Much of the destruction and death that visited the Philippines in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries came as much from the wars with Spain and America as from the hundreds of "earthquakes, typhoons, floods and other acts of God" that occurred. Sylvia Mendez Ventura details some of

the worst calamities which hit the Philippines at this time. Between 1890 and 1899, for example, the country was shaken by some 600 earthquakes! Volcanic eruptions shook the archipelago repeatedly, particularly those of Mayon in 1897 and Taal in 1911 (which alone caused 400 earthquakes in four days!). Even more debilitating were the cholera and small-pox epidemics that ravaged the population between 1902 and 1904 and again between 1905 and 1906. These give one an insight as to how painful and insecure life was during this period. It also helps to explain the great significance of the artesian wells, vaccinations, disinfectants, and even physical education classes that the Americans introduced in the Philippines.

Innovation in practically all areas of Philippine society distinguished this period. Events ranging from the trivial to the crucial happened during the turn of the century, as well as the introduction of novel goods and services. Isagani Medina and Luning Ira's "What Will they Think of Next?" catalogues these Philippine "firsts", for example, the first importer of motor cars (Bachrach Motors, 1907), first hotel (Hotel del Oriente, 1889), first telegraph and telephone lines (1880 and 1890 respectively) and so on. The appearance of these Philippine "firsts" was to produce indelible marks on the nation's history and further underscores the onrush of modernization at this time.

The book closes with two charming pieces dealing with the Filipino's most pressing domestic arrangements: his house and his furniture. "The House with No Nails" by Gilda Cordero Fernando describes the basic design of a typical nineteenth century house and the process of its construction. Essentially an elaboration of the nipa hut, the classic nineteenth century house was a two-story affair with massive adobe stones making up the ground floor and light wood laced with capiz shell windows making up the second floor. The roof was pitched high and laid with red tiles held together by lime and "sometimes with the tile setter's prayer." No nails were used as "thin dowels and wedges of hard wood held the house together" making it virtually rust-proof.

The interior of a nineteenth century house, however, was generally sparse except in the case of the very rich whose furniture reflected both their wealth and level of education. Martin I. Tinio, Jr.'s "Inside Story" is a thoroughly engrossing description of the types and styles of furniture used by Filipinos, especially the elite, during this period. "Vienna" furniture was one of the most enduring status symbols among the rich as were pianos and marble table tops. Where furniture was concerned, ostentation, ornateness, and permanence were the by-words.

The Filipino house and its furnishings both serve as enduring symbols of an era of significant change. For the Filipino house, like the Filipino himself, represented a complex synthesis of indigenous needs and foreign cultural influences.

Important as these fourteen essays may be in terms of conveying the spirit of the era, they are overshadowed by the vintage photographs contained in

the book. This magnificent collection of old photographs of the country's inhabitants and cities constitutes the very soul of *Turn of the Century*. Pictures of the city's streets in their black and white starkness dramatically contrast with the Kodachrome banality of today. They trigger a stream of emotional responses from the viewer. On one level, these streets seem comparatively charming and quaint with their *fin-de-siecle* buildings; on another level, they possess an eerie, otherworldly quality — the distance and strangeness of the past rebounding to the present like the image of an alien civilization. Even more striking are the photographs of the people, whether in groups or as individuals, Filipinos and foreigners alike. One endless source of fascination in these pictures is the people's faces: unsmiling (except for the rare exceptions of an Igorot boy on p.14 and a woman on p.16) and brooding so that even the children look old. Uncertainty and trepidation are etched on their faces, but so is a quiet dignity and firm determination that comes with suffering and abounding faith. These faces mirror the spirit of the age in a way that no statue nor history book can. For the photographer's camera was once the harbinger of the twentieth century, intruding upon the peoples and places of nineteenth. The resulting photographs vividly record a slice of this constant encounter between tradition and modernity, hinting ever so subtly at the human tension that existed in the process.

Turn of the Century is a significant addition to the literature of Philippine social history. A work of this magnitude should have included an index and a basic bibliography — both indispensable tools for the scholar and interested layman alike. Nonetheless, the fact remains that Ms. Gilda Cordero Fernando and Mr. Nik Ricio have produced an intelligent and beautiful evocation of an era so crucial to our history.