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Filipino Identity: The Haunting Question

Niels Mulder

Abstract: With their national origins in Spanish and US imperialism, and in the subsequent wake of intense waves of cultural colonisation, educated Filipinos are often at a loss about what their roots are. In order to bring much needed clarity to the ongoing debate about what it means to be Filipino, this essay will relate the past to the present by tracing the evolution of, and the continuities in, the essence of Filipino social organisation and worldview, drawing frequent comparisons with Indonesian and Thai data. The core approach taken – wherein these issues are examined through the lens of culture – is complemented with (i) reflections on common Southeast Asian principles of social construction and (ii) with the pinpointing of the systemic divides that prevent Filipinos from identifying with the collective whole and from growing into a nation of committed citizens. The paper is of relevance both to scholarly researchers and to others with practical interests in the region, as it will enable them to better know the people that they are or will be dealing with.

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Keywords: The Philippines, history and identity, nationalism, civil society, American cultural intervention, school curriculum, cultural history

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Prefatory

As an exercise in the *histoire des mentalités*, this essay traces the evolution of the characteristic ethos infusing the state and nation in the Philippines. While state-propagated nationalism and its associated rituals are inescapably present in day-to-day life, these dynamics fail to evoke a popular sense of belonging to a shared civil world. It seems as if the public sphere of the state and the private sphere of everyday life do not connect, a reality which is enhanced in practice by the systematic exclusion of the ordinary citizen from the country's oligarchic political process. As it is often expected that a vocal civil society can provide the cultural leadership that successfully moulds the nation, the reasons for the underdevelopment of such a force need to complement the narrative.

The Problem of Nationhood

The depth to which American cultural imperialism has penetrated Filipino society is demonstrated by the listlessness of the nation-building spirit within it. In a country like Indonesia the erasure of the humiliation of the colonial past was not so much a priority as a matter of course, and it is inconceivable that Indonesians would invoke the Dutch era as a way to explain the history and shape of their present nation state. In the Philippines, however, the granting of independence is still celebrated with the depiction of the lowering of a conspicuous American flag on the current one hundred peso note, while the names of Taft, Harrison, Lawton and the like live on. Even so, after independence, many places have been renamed after national heroes – and many more after not-so-heroic presidents, amongst whom Quezon leads the pack of those obscuring the history of provinces, towns, villages and streets.

Who cares? The very cultural imperialism that thwarts nation-building also destroys historical continuity, and so the Filipino sense of a collective becoming has been obliterated. As a “modern”, American-educated nation, the Filipino people should face forwards and be progress-oriented – thereby basically concurring with Henry Ford's dictum that “history is bunk”. Be that as it may, certain academic circles have recognised that the depth of the colonial impact has led to the “mis-education of the Filipino” (Constantino 1966) and a “colonial mentality” that keeps inferiority feelings alive, while fostering the blind acceptance of the superiority of anything emanating from the United States. As a result, in 1972, the Marcos dispensation promulgated the Educational Development Decree that, amongst other things, was intended to remedy the “problem of nationhood”.

Under Marcos, school education apparently did not succeed in instilling the desired sense of nationhood. Thus in 1987, Senator Ramos-Shahani proposed conducting research into “the weaknesses of the character of the Filipino with a view to strengthening the nation’s moral fibre”. In the resulting report, *Building a People, Building a Nation*, a panel of prominent intellectuals concluded that Filipinos showed a deficiency of patriotism and appreciation of their country, and were not in sympathy with their national government. Similar to the earlier appeal of the Educational Development Decree, these thinkers proposed that schools be tasked with propagating such values. As a result, “values education” became part of the national curriculum from 1989 onwards.

Nationalism

As many columnists, educators and officials would have it, the absence of vigorous nationalist sentiment is at the root of all sorts of social problems; as such, over the years this ever-repeated catchphrase has come to have something of a hollow ring to it. The evocation of “nationalism” as a catch-all for everything that is wrong can be related to the fact that in the native Tagalog language the concept is inherently vague; furthermore, it is used interchangeably with the terms *estado* (state), *bansa* (nation, country, state), *bayan* (country, national home, people) and *pamahalaan* (government, regime).

Historically, nationalism is a recent phenomenon that was consciously fostered in nineteenth-century Europe as a means of building the strength of the state through creating popular identification with its ruling regime. Subsequently, it became possible to mobilise the populace to celebrate their state and wage war in its name – under the motto “right or wrong, my country”. At its core, such blind loyalty to the state has nothing “natural” to it – it is the result of the propaganda of those who own the state. If the people, however, distrust the message propagated and thus do not accept it wholeheartedly, they will not identify with the state or regime and their loyalty cannot be expected or taken for granted.

In order to impress on Filipino first-graders a sense of belonging to the nation state, they are obliged to study an array of national symbols in line with the American example. While the flag is a powerful force amongst these designators, emblems such as the *bangus* (milkfish) – revered as the national fish – fail to arouse positive emotions. Even more astounding is the claim that the *lechon* (roast pig) is the national food, as it arrogantly excludes the Moslem population – and the poor to boot. Alongside these symbols we find an endless cycle of ceremonies. Schooldays begin with the raising of the flag (that in many cases had been up all night), the singing of the national

anthem (right hand on the heart) and the reciting of the nationalistic pledge. Following in this track, all sorts of meetings – from the tennis club social to the deliberations of the Senate – go through this same ritual, but in which obligatory prayer takes the place of the vow. Depending on their schedule, Filipinos may have to endure this rigmarole up to five times a day – which could lead one to wonder whether its deeper meaning has not worn thin for many people. In Lucena City, where I conducted my research, the flag was up day and night at the town hall, as it was at the provincial high school as well. This apathy corresponds with the apparent widespread disinterest in national holidays – Bonifacio Day, Rizal Day, Heroism or Bataan Day, Independence Day – that merely remind people of the closure of banks, schools and offices, and of having the leisure to clean their home. For all that, most are happily unaware that such days have been created to celebrate the state and to evoke the spirit of nationalism.

The Filipino Way

The lack of enthusiasm for celebrating the nation state contrasts with the enthusiasm that greets days that express “Filipinoness” and exemplify Pinoy civilisation. The days in mind in this regard are Christmas Day, Holy Week, Flores de Mayo, All Saints’ Day, the town fiesta and special occasions – such as the common outpouring of grief upon Corazón Aquino’s demise (2009), the mass sympathetic mourning of Flor Contemplacion’s execution in 1995 in Singapore (Rafael 2000b: 212–227) or when world-class boxer Manny “Pacman” Pacquiao defends his title; then, roads are deserted and everybody is glued to the television. These are the days that – like Pacman’s victories – do actually tangibly evoke a sense of national community. A state intent on commemorating itself will stage a military parade; the nation, however, expresses its sense of itself in sporting events, the victory of a beauty queen, or through emotive popular religious observances. It is in such moments, that people spontaneously express their sense of belonging to each other and their way of life.

The problem is not that, as is so often stated, Filipinos do not love their native land or are reluctant to identify with its inhabitants. They do, much the same as almost everybody in this world does. As such, their willingness to sacrifice their well-being – for example, by opting to be overseas workers in the “prison without bars” that is the Middle East – needs to be understood in context. Of course, their earnings are not intended for the republic, even though it often hails them as “heroes of the nation”, but to keep their loved ones afloat in a country without sufficient remunerative prospects. In brief, it is not a shortage of love for the native land that has

driven large numbers to seek employment abroad, but a deficit of confidence in the state and the class that runs it.

As a result, Filipinoness is expressed in its “little-traditional” forms in the home and local community. It is there that one finds the shared and distinctive representations of the Filipino ethos; the emblems of it – the diplomas and graduation pictures on the wall, the cute Santo Niño, the serene Lady of Lourdes or the Mother of Perpetual Help, the plaza with its diminutive Rizal statue, the town hall and church, the basketball court, the band, the bus shelter, the fiesta and processions – belong, in fact, to individual families and communities. None of these icons make reference to an overarching cultural centre; they refer to only themselves. Therefore, Filipino civilisation is expressed in a distinct lifestyle and in its characteristic ethos – rather than in abstract symbols that are meant to stand for collective history and the nation state.

Naturally, this little-traditional scope is reflected in the principles of social construction of the Christian lowlanders, who trace their descent bilaterally and whose religious imagination mirrors their kinship organisation (Mulder 1997). In their view, the social arrangement is a moral edifice based on family ties – with the “sacred” position of parents, hierarchy and unequal individuals who are obliged to each other through “debts of gratitude” that determine their measurable worldly life.

In the Philippines, lifeworld existence shades into a morally unobliging “public” space that, to the vast majority, appears as an anarchic domain of pragmatic or impersonal relations where one tends only to one’s political and economic interests. It is the arena reported in the media that provides the ephemeral images and scandals by which it is substantiated. Political news holds pride of place, and is consumed as a kind of spectator sport that nevertheless offers no serious competition to the slightly stupefying programmes broadcast nationwide. Hence, everyday culture radiating from the centre offers little to substantially hold on to. Through the interminable bombardment of the populace with fleeting symbols and endless distractions, the Filipino people are anaesthetised against genuine nationalism and identification with the state, against the ideals of active citizenship and contrary to the spirit of hope for the rule of law. They have by these means come to know that politics is too much talk and of little substance. So why bother to speculate about the desirable state of affairs? As a result, people feel they had better focus on survival and the safety of their family and take solace in religion.

At this point, it may be appropriate to note that religion, as a keystone of individual identity, has been patently prospering in Southeast Asia – especially in the Philippines – since the 1960s, and promises to be still going

strong for a long time to come (Mulder 2003; Willford and George 2005). Even as this religious drive is individual-oriented in its confirming of a person's moral worth, such religiously incited righteousness can also exert substantial pressure on those who hold political power. It was the Church's appeal that played an important role in the mass demonstrations against Presidents Marcos and Estrada. Similarly, religion was the driving force that ousted the Shah of Iran in 1978, brought down the self-appointed Thai Prime Minister General Suchinda Khraprayoon in 1992 and was a key factor in President Suharto's resignation in 1998, with the subsequent ascendancy of Moslem leader Abdurrahman Wahid.

Changing Middle Stratum

Whatever changes are occurring in the lifestyle and worldview of the Filipino middle classes, they still remain exemplary for the rest of the country's populace – as the former produce, disseminate and consume both mainstream and alternative ideas. Furthermore, their cultural milieu is the matrix of thought about the desirable order of society. Starting in the 1960s and continuing during the late Marcos and early Aquino years, progressive and nationalist ideas emanating from these quarters seemed to have fired the public imagination. Nowadays, however, the nation seems to have been lost sight of as a meaningful preoccupation in a globalising world, at the same time that primordial and professional bonds are strengthened.

If we compare developments with the long period of gestation of the “nation state” idea in neighbouring Indonesia – significantly present as of 1900, then subsequently organised through the Budi Utomo (1908) association, Sarekat Islam (1912) association and political platforms from the 1920s onwards – post-colonial nationalism in the Philippines has been no more than a flash in the pan. In 1946, when “quasi-sovereignty” was granted, the country was willingly more dependent on the United States than it had been during the pre-war days. Though this trend was emphatically countered by politicians like Claro M. Recto and Lorenzo V. Tañada, the historian Teodoro A. Agoncillo, and the social activist and author Amado V. Hernandez in the 1950s, their nationalism was not widely understood – even as President Garcia initiated a “Filipino First” economic policy towards the end of the decade. These early stirrings did, however, result in the efflorescence of nationalistic, social-emancipatory and anti-authoritarian movements in the 1960s that went underground after the declaration of martial law on 21 September 1972.

Following the assassination of Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino on 23 August 1983, the ideas of the 1960s once again resounded throughout the society.

As former students had meanwhile become professionals, this dissent was most vociferously expressed in their demonstrations in the business heart of Manila, Makati City, and in the evermore-audacious opposition press. When Marcos' shenanigans came to a head in the events that would catapult Ninoy's widow Corazón to the presidency in February 1986, it seemed as if social reconstruction was within arm's reach. However, it did not last. And if people on the progressive side were still in any doubt about where the tide was heading, then the Mendiola massacre of peasant demonstrators towards the end of January 1987 made it abundantly clear that the now-restored oligarchy was calling the shots. Even so, the legacy of idealism lived on into the early 1990s in a lively NGO scene and amongst the alternative press, but politically the visionaries had been marginalised and henceforward their ideas were rendered irrelevant to the public agenda.

Meanwhile, these visionaries have since been replaced by a generation of professionals vast in number who, as "martial law babies", went to school under the dictatorship. As this was a time of state developmentalism, the zeitgeist induced in students a career orientation that has continued until the present day. Their formal education was and is precariously lacking in social sciences and humanities content; at best, they are oriented towards "progress", resulting in generations of Filipino citizens who are socially inattentive and devoid of a sense of history. This runs parallel to the sea change in technology that has overwhelmed their experience of life. As McLuhan commented back in 1964, "the medium is the message" – and new media, new "extensions of man" and new sources of power, production and efficiency irreversibly change the world, and with it, our mindset.

In the wake of the idealistic 1960s, television intruded every Filipino home – and in doing so banished books. Gradually the calculator, and later, the barcode, expelled the ability to perform mental arithmetic. In the early 1980s, the computer came of age and revolutionised information and communication technology at the same time that stereo (and later videoke) drove out the guitar. In the 1990s, the Internet emerged. By the turn of the millennium, people had become mobile phone addicts. The effect of these changes on the way we imagine life to be demonstrates the abyss that separates the 1960s – with its belief in social constructability – from the present era.

In those recent olden days, it appeared as if there was some correlation and integrity between the Filipino way of life and how it was thought to be. Nowadays, however, the outside world seems to have been disconnected from experience as people orientate themselves to industrially and foreign produced images. With television and its illusions, they have entered a pseudo-reality of simulacra à la Baudrillard (1988) – wherein it becomes increas-

ingly problematic to separate the real from the fantastic. As a result, people stick to their identity-confirming inner circles and hold on tenaciously to their career – as all of us are finally coming to experience Buddha’s truth that life out there is indeed *maya* (delusory).

Civil Society?

In contrast with the activist student generation of the 1960s, the new urban middle stratum is not eager to be involved in “public” affairs. Besides, these days such affairs are obfuscated by the permanent bombardment of the general Filipino populace with messages that emphasise lifestyle concerns and consumption as the *raison d’être*. So while the demonstrations that finished Presidents Marcos and Estrada evoked the impression of a vigilant civil society, deeper analysis shows that actually hegemonic interests engineered public opinion in these instances. Accordingly, occasional popular mobilisation can be said to occur “in the name of civil society” rather than as the product of it (Hedman 2006).

Apart from these hegemonic interests, where would a vigorous Filipino civil society hail from? In the 1980s and 1990s, with the efflorescence of all sorts of cause-oriented groups and NGOs, people were easily led to believe in the vitality of civic consciousness. At the same time, the very proliferation of such groups demonstrated their basic flaw – often joked about as “two Filipinos equal two NGOs”. To get people to stick to a cause or a programme, even when it is one that is clearly to their advantage, is almost impossible as long as they remain oriented towards leading personalities and perennial interpersonal rivalries keep them from aligning behind common causes. Such misplaced focus makes them easily reduced to the playthings of power-holders and their divide-and-rule tactics.

There is more to this issue as well. A vigorous civil society can only function and flourish as a watchdog against political horseplay and economic manipulation if it has a vast recruitment base of educated, critically minded people. Even though there are quite a few such citizens, we should be aware, as Anderson cautioned in 1988, that the middle stratum of Philippine society is haemorrhaging from emigration, mostly to the United States – and so continually fails to develop into a significant competitor to the oligarchy (1988: 212).

Therefore, in the absence of a significant opponent, the republic is hostage to the political and business interests of oligarchs that have no stake in the strengthening of it; on the contrary, through “loopholing” the Constitution and the personalised political system, corruption has been consciously built in (Villacorte 1987). As a result, politics is held in low esteem by Filipini-

no citizens, even as they are made subject to its interests – over and against which they continue to feel powerless.

Public Realm

Ever since the 1920s, when Filipinos were given leeway to run their own affairs, the public sphere has been the arena of traditional or money politics – presided over by, first, the colonial and, later, the neo-colonial elite. The members of the elite regard the country as their private preserve and exploit it to their advantage. Consequently, the public realm is perceived as the field of contest of their political and economic interests. For most people, therefore, it represents a sphere either to defend oneself against or to take advantage of, as one's real life and identity belong elsewhere.

The depiction of the public sphere as separate from one's deeper, identity-confirming life is right on the mark. The outer world is there; we need it to earn money, to make a career, to pay taxes and for a thousand other things besides. However, it does not inspire the feeling of belonging, of citizenship, of responsibility; in brief, it is not "ours". Public space is where politicians broadcast their faces and names; it is where they claim merit for projects funded with tax revenue that they graciously put at the disposition of the voting populace. And as usual, politicians short-sightedly focus on the immediate, on expediency, on the ephemeral; it is like the faces on their billboards: the cult of face value, of opportunity and the corruption that has consciously been built into the personality-oriented system.

In other words, the public realm does not belong to the public as it has been hijacked by officials, politicians and businessmen. They care for it or neglect it and exploit it for their own gain. This is, moreover, what everybody knows and expects, because, as Corpuz (1969) argued, "in Filipino politics nepotism is ethically normal, and thus its practice [should] serve family-based interests". Following this example, it seems as if everyone can appropriate parts of the public realm as a matter of course, and that there is no policing authority to stop them. Buses halt in curves, on crossings, in the middle of the road, or wherever any descending or ascending passenger may request them to. In town, certain shops continuously blare out the run-of-the-mill radio broadcasts onto the street; people drop their rubbish wherever they go; the drone of the mall's advertising engulfs the neighbourhood; to survive the traffic anarchy, everybody needs to fend for himself – it must be said that most drive defensively. Again, with the exception of the aggressive driver, this is what everybody knows and expects, because in public space one has both to give in and to take care of oneself.

The interesting twin concerns of “giving in” and “caring for oneself” encapsulate in essence an old adage that the Javanese and Thai also go by, with the important difference that the orders of the republican and royal realms command the tangible prestigious public space that in the Philippines is missing. In the Philippines, it is advisable to tolerate erratic behaviour, as obstructing this expectation is a main cause of hot-headedness and long-lasting resentment. As a result, with “Filipino tolerance” standing in the way of order and civility, public space easily becomes a realm of anarchy.

Individual-Centeredness

In light of this situation, it is little cause for wonder that most Filipinos doggedly pursue their own trajectory irrespective of others. In a way, this is in line with the propagation of consumerism that stimulates people to acquire status symbols as a way to mark their individuality. In other words, where society is lost sight of, its component members come to the fore – and so the focus of public life is on outstanding individuals, rather than on the impersonal “generalised other” or on something as intangible as “the public interest”.

At present, Filipino social life is appreciably open to the wider world, and has become part of a post-national global environment that is not subject to any ideology other than the rules of expediency. Because of people’s dependence on the wider world for survival and advancement, it intrudes into private life – which gives rise to frustration. Subsequently, they express their grumbling in newspaper columns and letters to the editor or in sermons and exhortatory speeches that emphasise decency, sacrifice and personal virtue. This self-centred orientation leads away from legal or ideological attempts to come to grips with the public world that remains clouded in vagueness.

This moral myopia conveniently dovetails with the interests of the state-owning class. Its introduction of values education in order to improve the quality of public life seamlessly connected with the class’ roots in family and person-centred morals. Later, this thinking reverberated in the repeated appeals for moral reform that emanated from President Arroyo. Whereas suchlike social imagination necessarily fails to come to grips with society in the abstract, it may nevertheless be soothing to the individual soul. One may even argue that it is a timely arrival in a borderless world that leaves the person thrown back on such comprehensible, identity-confirming areas of experience as family and religion.

School, History and Identity

The course outline of the subject History and Government is political through and through, and is intended to support an independent state, three branches of government and foreign relations. To anticipate this situation and long before contact with Spain, school texts maintain that primordial communities possessed all of these, which implies that there was nothing to learn or that the continuous process of change and becoming does not apply in these islands. People there had a high civilisation. They even wrote down (some of) their laws as the *barangay* chieftain (*datu*) – who was also the head of the armed forces – lorded it over the thirty to one hundred families of his jurisdiction.

The school curriculum's approach to history and government is crammed with such ahistorical and irresponsible statements, and keeps the becoming of the state-owning class meticulously out of sight. Instead of presenting the cultural history of the slow evolution of a potential nation – an endeavour that would connect the past to the present – political chronology takes over. By chopping the march of history up into seemingly unconnected episodes – such as the Spanish colonial state, the Philippine Revolution of 1896, the Philippine–American War, the blessings of American colonialism and the Commonwealth, the Japanese occupation, liberation and independence – continuity and becoming have been lost sight of. As if to highlight this violation of history, the last period is presented through individual presidential reigns, martial law, the New Republic, the EDSA demonstrations of 1986 that undid Marcos, more presidential reigns, the EDSA demonstrations of 2001 that ousted Estrada and the intricacies of President Arroyo's administration.

Because this periodisation highlights transient affairs, observations made on the period of independence read like comments in a newspaper. Some school texts are adamant that politics is powered by opportunism, corruption and shady deals – in which sense, the picture of a rotten society is no different from that in the mandatory values education. In spite of such occasional realism, all texts must enumerate every president's noble intentions that, alas, invariably come to nothing – even as it is never actually explained why.

On the basis of such formal education as “legitimate symbolic violence” (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977: 13–15, 24–25), it becomes nigh on impossible for Filipino citizens to understand social life, let alone to identify with their nation and its past. When we reflect on the effects of the English language being used as the means of instruction, we see symbolic violence enlarged to such proportions as to cause the outright loss of roots. Mojares illustrates this with quotations from N. V. M. Gonzalez's *Work on the Mountain*, such as:

My merest jottings were notes not so much from an underground as from another world. [...] Rendered in an alien tongue, [that] life attained the distinction of a translation even before it had been made into a representation of reality [...] even before becoming a reality of its own (Gonzalez 2002: 297).

For present-day students, such extreme alienation appears to have abated with the gradual patching up of Constantino's "mis-education of the Filipino", even as those who are submitted to the discipline of English-speaking private schools may still find themselves unsettled when they, upon entering college, discover that they are not living in an English-speaking country and that there is nothing shameful about being able to express oneself in Filipino (Adizon 2010). Be this as it may, the quality of public schooling remains such that it regularly falls short of the mark of inculcating a collective identity on the basis of the bonds of history, language, experience and the geography of the encompassing state.

On the trail of violence such schooling inflicts, doubts about Filipino identity are typically voiced by the better educated who are at ease with the "national print language" (Anderson 2003: 45). Their very ability to understand and write in the language of power sets them apart and excludes them, as it were, from the discourse going on amongst the populace at large (Rafael 2000a: 199). At the same time, because of their access to the language of politics, the courts, the law, the broadsheet newspapers, the teaching of certain subjects and of tertiary education in general, they are made to mediate for the others – even as they experience it as if operating in a no man's land. No wonder then, that in the public realm of the nation and in contrast with the more self-confident Thai or even Indonesians, the Filipino intelligentsia raise the point of an identity that has been damaged or even become lost.

We take after whatever reaches us from the West, from America. We are imitators who have lost authenticity. How can we ever be self-confident Filipinos who stand identifiably on their own? (Introducer's comment on my lecture at Enverga University).

So if, theoretically speaking, schools should foster a sense of self that comes to include the wider community, we may safely conclude that the way it shapes this demand makes it impossible to imagine that one, as a student, is personally involved. Besides, at the same time that much attention is devoted to the birth of the *ilustrado* (Hispanicised intellectual) and popular nationalism in the period preceding the revolution, the present invocation of Rizal, Bonifacio and Mabini is no better than evoking phantoms of the past that are safely on the far side of the watershed event of the American occupation.

Ironically enough, current Indonesian school texts still refer to Rizal, the Revolution and the First Republic as being exemplary of the awakening of (anti-colonial) nationalism in Asia.

National Transcendence?

In spite of all the phraseology about “nationhood”, “moral recovery” and the underdevelopment of “nationalism”, there is nothing that gives a stronger reminder of a national doctrine than petty lists of symbols, an incoherent inventory of highly localised curiosities and ever-repeated anthem singing and flag-raising. The contrast with Indonesia’s Pancasila ideology and Thailand’s “theory of the three institutions” is striking, as these teachings evoke a model centre that lends legitimacy to the institutions of the state and that sets certain parameters within which national discourses can thrive. These frameworks also eventuated in Indonesians and Thai identifying with their nation states as matters of course.

As far as the Philippines goes, such a reality is a “could have been”, as the institution of the state has never been held in great esteem by the population as large. Colonial in its origins, the state’s contempt for and exploitation of the local populace could never lend it much legitimacy. If anything, the state was something to stay away from or to take advantage of. Accordingly, its local representatives, the *principalia*, developed a political culture of artfulness and deceit in the course of learning to balance the demands of a powerful overlord with their own interests (Corpuz 1989: xii–xiii). When they were finally put to the task of organising the state on their own, they duly inscribed the foundational ideas of “people’s sovereignty”, “justice”, “the separation of powers”, “popular representation” and (high-quality) “education” into the charter. However, since most or all of these concepts are no better than the figments of a foreign imagination, they were never actually taken seriously. Thus, when Marcos’s remarkable predecessor – Manuel L. Quezon, president of the Commonwealth – established himself as a virtual dictator he held no scruples about editing the 1935 Constitution to his own liking (McCoy 1989).

Since then, a perennial deficit of popular endorsement, poor performance and political manipulation has prevented institutions such as the palace and the Supreme Court from developing into shining, transcendent centres of the nation. As a result, there is little high cultural substance to overarch the little-traditional way of life of the general public. The only nationwide institution that could possibly qualify for such a reach is the Church, but few are those who would point to the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines as an authoritative centre. This is not only because

it dirties its hands in politics or because of its unpopular position regarding reproductive health, but most particularly because church life belongs in reality to the parish and its local traditions.

Arguably, history authenticates the identity of a nation state. It is the source of emotive symbols that lend pride and reason to the present as the presumed continuation of a semi-mythic past. Even so, whereas the Indonesians have their Majapahit and the Thai their Sukhothai, American imperialism cheated the Philippines of the glory of being the first Asian nation to defeat, seven years ahead of Japan, a Western power – an event that would inspire nationalists from Sun Yat Sen to Sukarno. Unfortunately, the Americans kept the humiliation of being a colony alive at the same time that they were overeager to denigrate the Philippines cultural past and confine it to the dustbin of irrelevance. Through creating, in Nick Joaquin’s metaphor, “a lettered generation of people without fathers and grandfathers”, or, in the colonial trope, “little brown brothers”, culture and history were aborted – and with it Filipino confidence and pride in identity and continuity. In brief, American aggression and tutelage brought about a cultural calamity in the Philippines.

Split History

The history of the Philippines begins with the Spanish *conquista*; if this is our focus, then history has given the Filipinos a bad deal indeed. Political history, however, is ephemeral; if we want history to cohere, we have to be aware of the spirit of the times, of reasons and of motivations. Since these constitute the broader gist of history, we had better follow Febvre’s (1973) call to trace the evolution of the ways of thinking and experiencing of the common man, the elite and other relevant groups. Following this advice, we will find the urgency of the past as a way to understand current existence. What began with the introduction of the plough and new crops, the wheel and the horse, Catholicism, the printing press and an opening up to the wider world had repercussions on local mindsets – it would eventually arouse the spirits of popular, *ilustrado* and elitist nationalisms; the idea of being Filipino; and notions about how to shape these ideas in a free country.

Unfortunately, already during the successful revolt against Spanish rule the nationalist potential of all and sundry imagining themselves as belonging together was effectively debilitated. This happened first through the liquidation of the popular Katipunan leader Andres Bonifacio, soon after the petty bourgeois leadership of Aguinaldo had to all intents and purposes taken over. Then came the blatant self-serving ethos of most members of the leading class (see Guerrero 1982). Third, it came through the explicit exclu-

sion of the common people in the *principalia*-run Malolos Republic (1898–99) that, fourth, lorded it over the populace so abusively that many became nostalgic for the Spanish past (Guerrero 1982: 175–179). No wonder that at the time the republic was fighting the Americans many common folk turned their back on it and even offered organised resistance, such as the Guardia de Honor in Pangasinan (Joaquin 1988).

Apart from the endemic split between the haves and the have-nots, the equally endemic opportunism of the erstwhile republican leadership forced most of them to side with the Americans. Whereas popular-based pockets of resistance against the new supreme authority held out until 1912, the Americans had little trouble in dousing the *principalia*'s nationalist impetus – firstly through opening up political and economic opportunity, then through saturating the privileged class with American-style modernity and school education.

What remained, in spite of the American steamroller, was a steadily evolving Pinoy way of life in which could be recognised the deep past, Spanish cuisine and Catholicism as well as American fast food, Coca-Cola and historical obfuscation. Yet in spite of these vicissitudes, there has been much more continuity in the epic process of Philippine becoming than there has been between the heyday of Majapahit and present-day Indonesia. This continuity demonstrates a culturally colonial past that can usefully serve to create the sense of a nation, such as the one plausibly pioneered by Corpuz, Joaquin and Zialcita.

Focusing on the history of the political economy, however, we find that – no matter what the regime – a self-assured class developed in the Philippines, whose interests are opposed to those of the common people. As the modern day *principalia*, members of this class have no interest in providing the cultural leadership an imagined community needs to be able to refer to. In this they are supported by a social imagination that is myopically focused on the immediate experience of life, and by a media that is almost exclusively centred on political personalities.

The Ruling Class

In establishing their dominion, the Spaniards were successful in co-opting the former chieftains (*datu*) and the upper echelon of freemen (*maharlika*) of the disparate communities (*barangay*). Through creating this privileged stratum of native *principalia* as their henchmen, the separation of the political class from the common people began to emerge and evolve as a phenomenon early on in the colonial era. Through the imperial policy of gathering

the population “under the bells”, these original *principalía* became the kernel of urban – in other words, of *pueblo* – society.

A separate class that developed in and around Manila was made up of the Chinese who had been attracted by the opportunities that the colonial emporium offered. Many of them took native Christian wives, so that by the time the Chinese were expelled from the islands in 1766, a considerable number of Chinese Filipino mestizos could step into their fathers’ shoes. Entrepreneurially minded, they came to dominate the retail trade of the islands and seized on the opportunities – just as many *principalía* did – that the commercialisation of agriculture and the opening of the country to world trade offered.

Since a measure of political clout and money invariably attract each other, the two classes fused. As the nineteenth century unfolded, their intermixture gave birth to the identifiable ancestors of the current state-owning elite (Simbulan 2005). During the last quarter of that century, this highly successful middle class had begun to send some of its male offspring to the sites of higher education in the colony and in the mother country, giving rise to a stratum of *ilustrados* who would mature into the vanguard of Filipino nationalism.

If these “enlightened ones” had had it their way, and if the Americans had not betrayed the revolution, the cultural leadership potential of the former could have created a transcendent national ideology that would have been able to unite Filipinos as a nation. This possibility comes to mind in light of the works of José Rizal; the ruminations on the state of Apolinario Mabini; and the ideas of Pedro Paterno, T. H. Pardo de Tavera and Isabelo de los Reyes as “the brains of the nation” (Mojares 2006). Equally influential were Lope K. Santos’s dream of social justice as unfolded in his widely read *Banaag at Sikat (From Early Dawn to Full Light)*, 1906, the authors of the hugely popular nationalistic or “seditious” theatre plays and the establishment of the Old Catholic Iglesia Filipina Independiente.

But it was not to be. The emergence of a hybrid middle class has been noted and we should be aware of its petty political position. Hence, when this bourgeoisie joined Aguinaldo’s revolution, many did so in the hope of fusing their economic acumen with political influence. As realists, they were not interested in *ilustrado* idealism – and would soon openly accommodate the new American overlord, who was generous in dispensing political opportunity. When, in the 1920s, the leash to the new master was relaxed, they stormed ahead in plundering the country’s resources as if they had never heard of the idea of the common good (Anderson 1998: 202–203). If there was such an idea in currency at all, it was the Commonwealth with the United States that beckoned.

The grant of independence in 1946 resulted in the curious – at least for Southeast Asia – spectacle of a privileged class that had always been subservient to its masters becoming the tutelary heir to the latter’s power. Consequently, it is colonial history that legitimises the present elite, which has long since lost its anchorage amongst the ordinary folks. Largely mestizo, and culturally oriented to the West, its members do not feel they have anything more in common with the “common *tao*” (ordinary people) than the vernacular in which orders are given. Besides, as a consolidated elite it also stands in opposition to the modern, educated public as they have and had no interest in allowing for a nation of participating citizens. As a result, ideas about the common good remain underdeveloped and lack a broad social base.

If there is an issue of nationhood or an absence of popular identification with the common weal in the Philippines, the problem should be firmly pinned on the country’s oligarchy, whose selfish interests dictate the necessary exclusion of all others. Repeatedly, ordinary people have expressed their desire to partake in the country’s direction and destiny. One might think in this regard of the popularity of the Katipunan association that initiated the Revolution of 1896, the socialist and communist movements during the American period, the popularity of the Democratic Alliance (1945), the hope of the *masa* expressed in the elections of Magsaysay (1954) and Cory Aquino (1986), and the landslide victory of the populist “Erap” Estrada (1998), and his share of 26 per cent of the vote in 2010. Whatever the hopes of the ordinary folk, though, they have been persistently betrayed by a state-owning class averse to their emancipation and nationalism. Ordinary citizens are able to express their belonging through cheering a glorious Pacquiao, but should stay well clear of politics and the affairs of the state – even if they are allowed to cast their vote with regard to them.

Southeast Asian Social Imagination

While sociological concepts such as “class” have become part of Western imagination and may capture life on the ground there in a somewhat recognisable manner, in Southeast Asia such designations are at best latent tools that are currently not very relevant in understanding social life. Here, at least in my experience with representatives of approximately half its population (Javanese, Thai, Filipinos), sociological thinking is not part of the emic imagination. This is not to say that there are no well-trained sociologists in the region capable of performing all the tricks of Western social analysis. However, in my experiences with locals over the past fifty years, I have consist-

ently been amazed that many steadily reverted to their indigenous moral view at the drop of an unwelcome hat in our discussions.

For most Southeast Asians, social life is rooted in the immediate experience of a hierarchically ordered social arrangement based on the essential inequality of individuals and their mutual obligations to each other. This tangible world blends into the surrounding (not morally obliging) space of nature and wider society that appears as the property of others – be they religious figures, politicians, officials, landlords and/or economic power-holders. Whereas this area may be seen as a “public in itself”, it is not experienced as “of the public” or “for itself”. It is the vast territory where “men of prowess” (Wolters 1999: 18–19) compete for power, the highly admired social good (King 2008: 177).

Accordingly, society is reduced to an aggregate of person-to-person bonds that are supposedly in good order if everybody lives up to his or her ethics of place. As a result, there is nothing naive or amazing about persons high up in politics – be it senators or the president – repeatedly appealing to a moral way of life in order to fight endemic corruption that, to a sociologist, is rooted in the exploitation of privilege in an amoral public domain lying beyond the constraints of the tangibly experienced realm of life.

In the absence of sociological or ideological understanding, people experience their moral inequality as *de rigueur*. Because of this individual-centred perception, concepts such as civil society, democracy, the public good and the common weal are resistant to explanation and remain – in school texts at least – hidden in vague statements about the equality of citizens, according to the Constitution that is repeatedly invoked as the Mariang Makiling or Godot-like saviour of the nation (Mojares 2002: 1–19).

Mental Isolation

Melinda Quintos de Jesus’ critique on the English-language press highlights that its shrinking readership has to content itself with the antics of traditional politicians, scandal and (in the main) ad hoc, extemporised commentary. Investigative journalism is seriously underdeveloped in the Philippines, and incisive analysis of national – let alone world – issues is absent. Even so, journalism is a very dangerous occupation there, as “the killings [of its practitioners] are part of a systemic failure, another shameful reflection of the national ‘culture of impunity’” (Quintos de Jesus 2007: 137).

The everyday journalistic fare leaves issues lying beyond local politics and business peacefully out of sight. There is almost no analysis of social or cultural matters aside from the copious supplements provided on entertainment, high society and lifestyles. If we go by the scarcity of international

news reported and the arbitrariness with which it has been plucked from the wires, the Philippines appears to exist in a vacuum of broader awareness. Neighbours only exist if they have been ravaged by a tsunami or typhoon; the news from Baghdad is of car bombs; and if we hear anything from the United States, then it will only be about Barack Obama's chances of political survival.

Such mental isolation has its consequences for one's identity, as we normally need "the other" to know who and what we are – and are not. We therefore need history – and we need to face it honestly, otherwise we will end up with a history without sense. On this count, the mental isolation of the country stands out best if we consider the *Pilipinohiya* (Philippinology) fad at the University of the Philippines during the 1980s and 1990s. Under the cloak of academe, rabid nationalists proclaimed the pursuit of a *pantayong pananaw* (a kind of "we amongst ourselves point of view") that could arrogantly dismiss history, comparison and becoming (Mulder 2000a, b).

The problem of mental isolation is much older though. It was the Americans who virtually foreclosed the process of Philippine becoming. Through the former's hijacking of the latter's history and roots, Philippine being in the world was subsequently steeped in insecurity; so when independence was granted, it became clear that there had been more of a nation in place in 1898 than there was in 1946 (Joaquin 1988). In the nineteenth century, the gradual opening of the country to trade, modern thought, secularism and nationalism provided windows to the world that stimulated mental emancipation and the emergence of the country's public intellectuals; it fostered self-conscious self-confidence. Save for the inescapable window to the United States, American smugness closed each window one-by-one – and so there remained nothing to derive comparative identity from, except the American way.

While it initially seemed as if this umbilical cord stretching the vast expanse of the Pacific was gradually withering away, martial law and economic misery at home came to breathe new life into the colonial relationship after 1972. As a result of expanding overseas contract work and massive middle-class emigration to the United States, aspirations for the good life came to lie on the horizon again – thereby suffocating national enthusiasm, while also putting the country into the position of a foster child dependent on handouts, nostalgia and quest for one's roots of Filipino Americans (de Quiros 1990, quoted in Rafael 2000b: 206–209). This open window to the good life of foreign-based relatives gives rise to feelings of inferiority, as well as insecurity in one's own identity due to the failure to adequately provide. One's own country is thus seen as not being good enough, its quality of life

as miserable and its aspirations are directed towards to the United States, which lives “in the heart”.

Exemplary Centre?

Whereas the public realm obviously belongs to the powerful, it does not seem to be centred on anything other than transitory presidents who command little prestige. For the years that they are in office, they dispense patronage in order to build a “loyal” following – but from the moment they are out, the picture changes. In other words, this centre is in continual flux and represents nothing but a temporary coalition of privately propitious ties that offer little substance to hold on to. Yet, it is in fact these private ties that represent the state.

The self-representation of the state as the institutional guardian of the public realm is – as it is in the school curriculum – almost exclusively political-administrative in nature. Because personalism is in a way constitutional, nepotism has been built in and abuse of the law is a matter of course. In the absence of a national doctrine and in view of the politicisation of the primary institutions of the state – such as the palace, Congress and judiciary – the republic has no authoritative cultural-historical centre that is above politics and to which people can proudly refer. The substitutes for national discourse are the inane productions of the media, their endless parade of simulacra of what life is not and an English-language media that consists of a near-exclusive diet of political exposés.

Because of the chasm between cultural and political life, the state resolutely fails to express the nation. After all, the idea of “nation” is cultural; it is about the feeling of belonging together in a country of staggering diversity. The tedious uniformity that the school curriculum is expected to instil is so unconvincing as to be ultimately self-defeating. In view of my observations in the comparable location of Indonesia, respect for diversity next to a credible cult of the whole enrich the nation and succeed in elevating it above the corruption of politics and the expediency of the state. Filipinos, though, merely have to make do with the overarching politics of Manila’s mal-administered internal colonialism, which does not manage to evoke the feeling of belonging or wholeheartedly identifying with the whole. As a result, national identity remains spurious at best.

State and Public

A state that relegates its citizens to the cultural cold cannot be expected to arouse much enthusiasm from them. This condition is exacerbated by an

economy that does not deliver prosperity and that leaves a third of the population to exist in dire drudgery below the poverty line. In order to escape from the depressing circumstances at home, millions have sought refuge on foreign soil. In addition to the approximate over two million Filipinos temporarily working abroad are the millions of more highly trained Filipino professionals who have resettled, mainly in the United States. Because of this brain drain, the country's middle stratum will remain inarticulate and demands on the state will remain unconvincing, meaning that agenda-driven action will not be forthcoming any time soon.

There is more to this. With a disastrous social studies curriculum and the near absence of social analysis exercised by the media, the civic imagination is continually failing to develop. At present the prevailing career orientation amongst those better educated means that civic action can hardly be expected to happen in the foreseeable future. Moreover, in a state that is privatised, corruption is the norm. As a result, whistle-blowing represents merely an annoyance to entrenched interests. Because of this, such outspokenness will only be self-destructive and invite a steady stream of personal vilification that has little or nothing to do with the larger issues at hand.

The case of Antonio Calypjo Go is a notable example of this point, as well as an illustration of the general apathy concerning endemic public problems. For a long period of time, and with considerable publicity, Go exposed the nonsensical material and factual inaccuracies that are densely woven into current Philippine schoolbooks. Since almost everybody in the country has children, grandchildren or relatives in school, one might have expected his cause to be supported by a considerable lobby. However, after fourteen years of campaigning he finally decided to throw in the towel in 2010. The quality of public education provided is apparently a trivial issue to the citizenry at large, while those who reviled him are still after his skin.

In this situation, it cannot be expected that the spirit of self-conscious citizenship will come to permeate Filipino society anytime soon. As such, a concerned, critical public – intent on taming the anarchy that currently reigns in the Philippines – is nowhere in sight. These days, individual habitus – or the personal way of being in the world – and competition for personal glory are what matter; at the same time, the mass media seem to do everything in their power to keep it this way.

Authenticity

Early in my research on the Filipino urban middle-class mentality, my host asked: “Niels, what is a Filipino?” Answering his own question, he characterised the Filipino as a Roman Catholic, English-speaking Malay with a

Spanish name and a predilection for Chinese food. This very mix shows that the present-day Filipino is the historic outcome of international exchanges and inputs that, at first sight, may have eroded indigenous roots in the past while dressing up the Filipino in foreign attire. Even so, the denial of Malay or Austronesian roots and the ignorance about Southeast Asia are self-chosen and constitute a grave disservice to the quest for authenticity and nation-building (Mulder 2012). As a result, the spectral voice of the nation state is unconvincingly projected and the harness that it invites students to dress up in does not meaningfully fit anybody.

The widespread ignorance about the country's cultural affinity with its neighbours results in a helpless insularity. The feeling of exclusion from home affairs results in non-participation in public life. Both tendencies deflect from the nation and reinforce identification with the familiar. In this way, the lifeworld has become the fortress of authenticity; there, nobody ever doubts who and what they are. It is the wider world of citizenship and membership of a national community that inspires doubt; this wider world does not arouse the sense of what is collectively "ours". As a result, people do not feel that they belong to it, let alone that they can imagine belonging to the unknown others out there and sharing an identity. This Filipino problem of identity is home grown and its locus is the underdevelopment of the idea, the feeling and the practice of national citizenship. It is a systemic problem, and the "system" has all the necessary structures in place to keep it this way.

The resulting doubts about what "authenticity" actually is may be aggravated by the Southeast Asian tendency of being open to the world (Reynolds 2006: 23) and of wanting to be up-to-date (Wolters 1994: 4). In itself, this openness and desire for modernity is part of the local way of being. At the same time, in the present era of internationalisation, people the world over are exposed to the relentless advance of new media that is changing and homogenising the outer surface of ways of life. As a result, a characteristic of the globalisation process is the anxiety about the survival prospects of one's own culture on the one hand, and the fear of being behind the times on the other. In the eyes of others, this is no less a characteristic of the self-confident Thai (Reynolds 2006: 277–303) than of the less self-assured Filipino. To speak to this, it is refreshing to realise that "survival of culture" and worry about the loss of authenticity is as old a phenomenon as the generation gap itself. As shown by my focus on the inner core, on the little-traditional ways, there is no need for concern about "authenticity" and creativity, as Filipinos have time and again reshaped the imported according to their own image – as is attested to, for example, by Joaquin (2004) and Zialcita (2005).

Because of their exposure to and absorption of American complacency, the Filipinos may in retrospect be the pioneers of their self-doubt. In any case, societies the world over find themselves exposed to self-uncertainty these days as a result of having come to be situated in the no man's land created by global capital and technology flows. If it is any of succour to the Filipino reader, doubt about who "we" are has even become a characteristic discussion amongst the citizens of the oldest (non-city) republic in Europe, the Netherlands. With a process of nation-building behind them that stretches back to the time Legazpi established Spanish dominion in the country that bears his king's name, the Dutch embarked on their nation-shaping war of liberation from the tyranny of His Most Catholic Majesty Felipe II. These days, however, the Netherlands struggle with the consequences of massive immigration and the resulting multicultural society; with rootless, internationally produced culture; and, with the explosion of individual lifestyling – circumstances that are all gnawing away at the previously assumed Dutch identity. Everywhere one looks, it seems that the reach of "authenticity" stretches less and less far, as we are thrown back instead on the matters of the heart, family, home and religion.

Conclusion

The deficiency of strength that Filipino national identity possesses and the insufficient adherence that Filipino nationhood attracts lie in the failure of the state to mould the population into an encompassing moral order in which people can distinctly imagine that they belong together. In the absence of a shared narrative of collective emancipation that successfully ties the individual's private life to an authoritative centre of civilisation, we find two opposing "nations" co-existing in the independent Philippine state: the state-owning oligarchy versus the nation of the ordinary people. This cleavage is enhanced by the conflict between the arbitrary nature of politics and the identity-affirming inner core, the each-to-his-own of the public realm versus the reassurance of little-traditional life and the English language versus the vernacular. As a result, it keeps all and sundry – including the members of the new Filipino middle class – from identifying with the collective whole and prevents them from developing into a nation of genuinely committed citizens. Because these cleavages are systemic, nation-building remains a task of which completion will stretch into the distant future.

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