

## **A New Perspective on Philippine History**

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Elizabeth Medina

(The introductory paragraphs are removed for brevity.)

## **A Complex, Surreal History**

Ours is a complex, far ranging, even bizarre and surrealistic history, which has tended to be utilized at different moments as a battleground for rival ideologies or as a theater for anecdotal, parochial interpretations. Clearly we are Asian by geography and racial provenance, but by history we are part of Western civilization, Western culture and Western politics. We can rightly claim to be Hispanic American Asians -- "American" signifying our having incorporated cultural legacies from both North and South America - though we are unaware of the historical, cultural and racial bonds we share with the latter.

For the sake of brevity I will not develop here my perception of how drastically and deleteriously the writing and teaching of our history -- and the formation of our identity -- were affected by the official history disseminated during American rule and by post-1946 Filipino educational policies, increasingly following an extreme indigenist orientation that defined itself as anti-colonialist, but, above all, anti-Spanish.

I will share with you my discovery and understanding of the deep importance of our Hispanic heritage, achieved through 17 years lived in Latin America, the observation of her present reality and the study of her history.

## **The Mutual Non-Awareness between the Philippines and Latin America**

Our non-awareness of Latin America is the product of historical and geopolitical vicissitudes beyond our control, but today our non-awareness can and should end, for by learning about Latin America we will overcome our imperfect comprehension of our Hispanic past, and thus be able to support ourselves over the bedrock of a forgotten Hispanic Filipino identity that, without our knowing it, still lives within us, and -- I firmly believe -- holds the key to our empowerment.

Those historical vicissitudes made us see ourselves in extreme contraposition to Spain, and later to North America, which impressed on us the impossibility of identifying with or being mirrored by either image, so different from us in so many glaring respects. Having lost the few connections we had with Hispanic America - especially the visible, logistical ones with Mexico and Peru - it was inevitable that the 20th-century generations of historians would increasingly look to Asia and our pre-Hispanic identity, a stance that paradoxically was first championed

by our national hero, Dr. Jose Rizal - who was the prototypical Hispanic Filipino.

Because of our separation from Hispanic America, we have likewise not learned about the historical and social experiences of Latin America, presented in the works of her many outstanding writers, historians and thinkers, works which could have enriched and clarified our relationship with our own Hispanic legacy and the difficulties we faced in recognizing and positively channeling our evolving cultural identity.

Latin America has also been deprived of learning about our history and profiting from the study of our own historical experience and cultural achievements. Amazingly, most Latin Americans are ignorant, both of our country's geographic location, and of our having been a Spanish colony 88 years longer than they.

### **Importance of a New Understanding of the Hispanic Filipino World**

Unless we, the Filipinos of today, widen our historical and cultural horizon to include Hispanic America, we will continue to suffer from a forced, partial and flattened vision of our own history and our truly complex and astonishing cultural legacy and identity.

The fact is that that Hispanic Filipino society did exist. It was the product of centuries of evolution; a valid social and cultural construct that included all Filipinos then living in the Philippines, regardless of their blood lineage, skin color, social class, educational level, religious faith. The Chinese and the Muslims were likewise encompassed and included within that Hispanic Filipino cosmos, even when they were largely in a relationship of radical differentiation from its ruling paradigm. They nevertheless were coexisting in dynamic relationship with the Christianized Filipinos and the Spanish, within a Philippines that was already, after almost 19 generations, hispanized in her unique, hybrid way, whose development resembled that of the Hispanic American societies, even long after they had become independent from Spain.

The Generation of 1896 was the final fruit of the Hispanic Filipino society and culture that had evolved in the course of 333 years of coexistence with the Spanish, under the rule of that European power. We may say many things in criticism of that period, but if we are able to exercise a modicum of objectivity - meaning if we can look at the past consciously setting aside our pre-formed judgments about it - we must admit that the modern Filipino nation state had its genesis during Spanish colonization and not before it, nor during or after North American rule. The Hispanic Filipino Generation of 1896 birthed Filipino nationhood and national identity, they were the first Filipinos - however, their generation was not made up of Filipinos as we are today, but of a quite different sort of Filipino. To speak in a generality -- but a powerful and respect-worthy generality no less -- they were Filipinos who made the decision for the very first time to collectively and consciously forge a nation.

From the point of view of the Muslim Filipinos, it was an imperfect decision, granted, and they were marginalized from the articulation of the Constitution. Nevertheless, the Muslim Filipinos joined the struggle to end Spanish domination and they also joined the Republic's resistance against the North American invader. Morally and historically speaking, therefore, even Muslim Philippines was part of the revolutionary and republican processes.

### **The Forgetting of Hispanic Philippines**

Today, very few persons are left in the Philippines who can still remember the personality, the social attitudes and customs, the world view, the soul of the Hispanic Filipinos. Modern biases have led to the erroneous belief that the only Hispanic Filipinos were the so-called mestizos and criollos, the fair-skinned, Spanish-speaking worshippers of the anti-Filipino *kastilas*, who were a bane on our land and deserved to be banished from our memory. In fact, our entire culture is mestizo, our entire nation is mestizo, because our culture and our blood are the product of much mixture, even before the arrival of the Spanish, the Portuguese, the Dutch, the British, the Germans and the North Americans in our land. In fact, under the North Americans there was pressure brought to bear on our educational institutions to abandon instruction in Spanish, and English finally triumphed only because the power of modern telecommunications, of popular U.S. culture, reduced the native Hispanic image and its idiom to a politically-incorrect anachronism for the youth. The imposition of English, American technology and popular culture swept away our precious and painfully-won cultural moorings -- our pre-American values, our pre-American Self -- with the force of a cultural hurricane. It was a first successful experiment in massive cultural reprogramming that confused subsequent generations into taking as an article of faith that what was purely Filipino ought to have nothing Hispanic in it -- the better to ingrain in us the fatal worship of their alien image. In the new cultural landscape introduced and institutionalized under North America, our world became the United States. We adopted the Anglo-Saxon way of life as the most valid construct, and it was only a matter of time before the last Hispanic Filipino generation died away -- from the upper class down to the middle class and the servant class -- and Filipinas finally became in all our minds, only either The Philippine Islands, or *Republikang Pilipinas*. Finally, the chauvinism of defining pure Filipinoness as synonymous with speaking Tagalog erroneously elevated the Tagalogs as the most authentic Filipinos who possess the most genuinely Filipino tongue! And yet, being Filipino had to mean being capable of transcending dialect, region, even religion, even as it did not deny them. For to be a Filipino nation required our ability to be proud and respectful of our own dialect and regional identity, but never to the detriment of our pride in and respect for all other Filipinos' dialects and regional identities.

### **The Filipino Republic of 1898 and the Latin American Republics**

The Hispanic Filipino Republic that was founded in 1898 differed from the Latin American republics founded between 1810 and 1823 only in the fact that the founders of the Malolos Republic were racially and culturally more heterogeneous than the Latin American founders, who were in their great majority creoles from the landowning classes.

We are all aware of the exogenous reasons for the destruction of the project to create a Hispanic Filipino Republic, but little study and analysis has been devoted to the endogenous reasons, which I propose as having to do essentially with the problem of fragmented, alienating micro-identities, even as the unifying image of Filipino nationhood had arisen in all its brilliance and force. Perhaps we could still have worked out a *modus vivendi* among ourselves, or we would have entered into subsequent phases of internal power struggle, as happened in the case of Mexico. However, the invasion by the United States created a new polarization between the revolutionary/republican and the counter-revolutionary/pro-American factions, and all of us know what was the outcome.

Today, after generations of efforts to minimize the importance of the Hispanic culture and era to the Filipinos, we must acknowledge the truth that it is simply unscientific to continue to believe that 333 years of written - even more important, lived - history as a Spanish colony, as Spanish subjects, left absolutely no profound imprint in our Filipino soul, in our collective historical consciousness. This is inconceivable because human beings are culturally permeable in their essence and exist in symbiotic union with their environment, which is human as well as natural. It is enough to look at the engravings, drawings, paintings, photographs of the Hispanic past to see the uncontestable reality of a Hispanic Filipino world that was peopled by the entire gamut of beings and creatures, from Europeans to Chinese to natives; from rulers to subjects; the old, the young and the middle-aged; men, women and children; urban dwellers and rural folk -- with their machines, vehicles, animals, buildings, homes, tools, dress, music, wares, social rituals, and so on and so forth. It was in fact a world of rich and varied presences, a mixture of races, codes, rituals, languages, customs, creeds. There was no pressure to all be the same, to act the same, to look the same, to talk the same. Rather there were serious social problems and political grievances that demanded solution and a process that urgently required social progress. There was a nation on the threshold of maturity, to which her very Metropolis had led her; unfortunately, the Mother Country was immobilized and herself in crisis.

Whether it pleases us or not, and notwithstanding our particular cultural or political susceptibilities and sensitivities, that Hispanic Filipino world was the birthplace of our historical and moral reality as a nation.

Even Muslim Mindanao had reinforced her separate cultural reality and affirmed her autonomous identity throughout the centuries of alternating armed conflict and establishment of pacts with the Spanish colonial government.

Can we therefore deny the facts and realities of our own evolution as a people without any deleterious consequences? Equally impossible. What has happened, it seems to me, is that by forcing a falsely purist historical image of ourselves, we have precisely made it impossible to affirm our own national development over a bedrock of true identity and reality. And without the greater world to mirror our misconceptions, born of our own geographical and historical isolation, it could not have been any other way -- until the blessed arrival of this era of planetary synthesis.

### **Societal Transition from Outer to Inner Awareness**

According to Arnold Toynbee, as a society or nation's attention increasingly moves toward the inner dimension of collective life, it acquires a deepening awareness of itself that signals the arising of a new stage of maturity. At first a collectivity's focus is on its external spheres of existence - survival, territorial consolidation, adaptation, technique. But as time passes, its attention is increasingly drawn towards the inner sphere -- coexistence, ethos, morals and ethics, regulation of social relations, internal development -- in a word, culture, the encoding and externalization of its spiritual experience and essential character. This seems to me to be happening within the Filipino nation once again, after a hundred years of emphasis on the external sphere.

And am I being presumptuous in speaking of a new perspective on our history when I am not a professional historian? I believe that in thinking about our history and offering a contribution with a positive and constructive intention, I only express the intelligence of our own people, our capacity to observe ourselves. In our young country's history, the first Filipino historiographer was not a professional historian but a writer and social critic: Dr. Jose Rizal. Though I am far from putting my modest effort at the same level as Dr. Rizal's work, I would nevertheless state the following idea, which I believe Dr. Rizal would have endorsed:

The arising of an independent, self-critical, open-minded intelligentsia, made up of citizens from all walks of life and all the social classes, is an indicator of a new stage of social maturity. And a society that respects its thinkers, artists and socially-aware elements, that gives them value and spaces of participation as a group above all and not merely as individuals, will assure its own viability and capacity to grow in an original, self-determined direction. It will develop its particular, original and positive identity, which is always based on self-awareness and inner-directed action toward clear, constructive goals.

A society, on the other hand, that marginalizes and closes avenues of development, expression and participation to its most dynamic, self-critical and creative elements in the inner spheres of study, thought, artistic creation --especially those spheres of work not directly related to commerce -- manifests absence of vision and self-destructiveness because of its decreasing capacity to adapt to the ever more complex conditions and demands of human civilization.

When a nation begins to look into itself with intellectual honesty and collective compassion, dramatic changes can be expected in its behavior, in the relations among its members, as well as in its relationships with other societies.

I envision the Philippines and the Filipinos as standing on the threshold of a great change that will see the reversion of our unclarified, largely external and ambivalent relationship with our past and present. As a humanist writer and thinker on my people's historical process, my self-elected task is to facilitate this great change in the sphere of historical reflection and interpretation, and to persuade my fellow Filipinos to do everything they can to be the midwives and obstetricians of our country's rebirth, and not its inquisitors and abortionists.

## **Conclusion**

The new perspective proposed on Philippine history can be summarized as follows:

If one wishes to study the Philippines from the point of view of geography and the Filipino people as Asians whose modern nationality was formed in the course of a history of two Western colonizations, separated by a brief interregnum in which the first republic of Asia was born, then the current approach is an appropriate and adequate perspective.

Moreover, if one's interest is to study the Philippines as a part of Asia and the Filipinos' purely Asiatic history, then one should undertake the compilation of all Asian sources documenting the historical relations between the archipelago's inhabitants and other Asiatic peoples, both before and during Hispanic colonization, during the short-lived First Republic, and during and after the American regime and the post-1946 period.

The above perspective would consist, however, of an approach more in keeping with that of official history - an aseptically scientific, rationalist focus that would pose difficulties for understanding the Philippines' evolution as a modern nation in a totalizing way. It would enable us to understand the "what", "where", even the "how" of the Philippine Republic today, but it would not rigorously describe or clarify the "who" and the "why" of the Filipino people.

On the other hand, if one's interest is to understand the human, historical process and the cultural evolution of the Filipinos, then one requires a meaningful larger context and other parameters that will enable one to establish relations of contiguity, similitude and contrast between the Philippines and other national processes. When one takes the Asian stage as the historical frame of reference, however, one discovers that the Philippines is a special case. Though there are other former Spanish colonies in Oceania, none has a historical process that equals or surpasses the complexity of the Philippines'. In terms of history and

culture, the Philippines and the Filipinos are in a certain sense an aberration in Asia, a fluke, because almost our entire written history situates us within the historical and cultural process of the West.

Thus, to understand the Philippines' historical and cultural narrative - its "real" human history - Latin American history and culture offer the most adequate and intelligible points of comparison and contrast, as another geographical space and collective historical protagonist that, like the Philippines, experienced a pre-Western era of indigenous development, a paradigmatic clash with Europe during the Age of Discovery, and the formation of hybrid, mestizo cultures, followed by emancipation and the founding of republics patterned like ours on the Western constitutional model of government.

And leading this line of thinking to its logical conclusion, the macroprocess that contains both Philippine and Latin American history is that of the Spanish nation and empire.

Thus, what Toynbee termed "an intelligible field of study" would either be Philippine history within the context of Asian geography and the historical interrelationships among the Asian countries and nations, or Philippine history within the context of the process of the Spanish empire and comparatively studied alongside the processes and cultures of Hispanic America.

I posit that, studied as it is now, in isolation, without a clear major frame of reference, or a frame of reference that is ambiguous and erratic, jumping from Asia to Europe to the United States, Philippine history and culture does not constitute an intelligible field of study.

It is my opinion that the second frame of reference (the Hispanic one), is also meaningful and useful for this present moment of globalization, in which the Pacific Rim is acquiring increasing importance for the Philippines as a new economic sphere for expanded trade relations and opportunities. But even more importantly, such a perspective would be enormously beneficial for the revaluation and dispassionate, balanced comprehension of the Hispanic Filipino past, which I believe is essential for us to understand our true cultural identity and historical experience.

Up until today, because of the rupture of our identification with the Hispanic world in 1898, the subsequent disappearance of the Hispanic Filipino generations, and the destruction -- whether material and evident (the fire bombing of Intramuros, the demolition of Spanish-era structures and the decay of our remanent architectural patrimony) or cultural and implicit (the irreflexive adoption of all things North American and the traditional disparagement of all things native) -- of that cosmology, we have been divesting ourselves of a precious and essentially Filipino cultural heritage, instead of studying it seriously and drawing strength and inspiration from it. Rather, we have tended to support ourselves solely on our North

Americanized selves or on a pure ideal that is pre-Hispanic, pre-Western, that is even more remote in time and - despite our wish to believe the contrary - a more elemental paradigm that is not enough, by itself, to enable us to effectively respond to the challenges of our syncretic, complex reality, to anchor and give us a sound comprehension of our intermediate and immediate past, and how they have led to our present.

Definitely, if we wish to be holistic and non-discriminatory toward ourselves, and work for an authentically Filipino union, we must unify and fully integrate all periods and stages of our history -- the ancient indigenous, the Hispanic, the Hispanic Filipino, and the American -- into the historical consciousness of the modern Hispanic Amerasian people called the Filipinos.

In synthesis, I have put forward that our official Filipino history has been largely shaped by a naturalistic, indigenist, Asian perspective, and I posit that our "real history" and process as a nation state, though it unfolded in Asia and we are an Asian people, is fully intelligible only when we apply to it a global and structural focus and study it within the larger framework of the Hispanic empire. The advantage of this broader perspective on Philippine history is that it will enable us to understand the past in a holistic way and free us from prejudices toward it that were in fact imposed by the pressures of U.S. rule, creating an anti-Spanish period bias in our official history. When we separate our old image of the *kastilas* (our colonial "black legend") from what Spain and the Spanish people were 500 years ago and today, when we distinguish between the degraded image of the oppressed *indios* under the *kastilas* and what was a new, dignified and powerful Hispanic Filipino people through the comparative study of Latin American history and the understanding of Hispanic culture that it will give us, we will be able to perceive our real past and better understand our present. The understanding of our real history will necessarily lead to the formation of a positive Filipino identity that will respect all differences among us but will also value, above all, what unites us. We will then be empowered to reach consensus and undertake the construction of the future we aspire to as a nation, that one we agree on as most favorable for us all.

Post Datum, June 2006: I am now studying the writings of José Martí and the history of Cuba, the final missing piece and the most promising of all keys to a deeper and broader understanding of our historical process.

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