

The Philippine Enigma

L'énigme philippine

Niels Mulder



Publisher

Presses Universitaires de Provence

Electronic version

URL: <http://moussons.revues.org/3685>

ISSN: 2262-8363

Printed version

Number of pages: 227-246

ISBN: 979-10-320-0088-5

ISSN: 1620-3224

Electronic reference

Niels Mulder, « The Philippine Enigma », *Moussons* [Online], 28 | 2016, Online since 04 November 2016, connection on 01 December 2016. URL : <http://moussons.revues.org/3685>

The text is a facsimile of the print edition.



Les contenus de la revue *Moussons* sont mis à disposition selon les termes de la Licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

The Philippine Enigma

Niels Mulder*

Independent Researcher

PREFATORY

In November 1987, James Fallows caused uproar with “A Damaged Culture. A New Philippines”. Today, almost thirty years later, his diagnosis still stands:

The prospects for the Philippines are about as dismal as those for, say, South Korea are bright. In each case the basic explanation seems to be culture: in the one case a culture that brings out the productive best in the Koreans (or the Japanese, or now even the Thais), and in the other a culture that pulls many Filipinos toward their most self-destructive, self-defeating worst. (*Atlantic Monthly* November 1987: 49-58)

OUR QUEST

In the note “The American Interlude”, Nick Joaquin comments on the cultural calamity occasioned by the American intrusion of 1898. Subsequent to the encounter with American imperial ambitions, the history of Philippines becoming was cut off, with the result that Filipino identity, budding civilization and national self-confidence were effectively aborted; simply said, the Filipinos were denied the glory of being the first Asian nation to defeat a Western power (Joaquin 2004; Mulder 2016a). In its stead, the nation languished in the limbo of self-doubt and self-denigration that plagues it until this very day and that, in its turn, evoked the “nationalist” myth-making and a-historical legerdemain that saturates schoolbooks and public opinion.

*Niels Mulder (1935; Dutch) has been engaged with provincial urban middle-class mentality in Thailand, on Java and the Philippines for most of the past 50 years. His latest is *Life in the Philippines. Contextual Essays on Filipino Being*, University of the Philippines Press, 2016.

In *Authentic Though not Exotic. Essays on Filipino Identity*, Fernando Zialcita presents us with incisive investigations and apt comparisons that convincingly expose “nationalist” prejudice and historical manipulation (Zialcita 2005; Mulder 2016b). Such exposing, however, is not popular, which reveals a basic answer to Joaquin’s “Why are we as a people so disinclined to face up to challenges?”. Small children, and with them many adults, prefer fairy tales. Novelists and movie-makers would be out of business if confronting reality were the preference, and so people are comfortable with lullabies that keep them pleasantly asleep. They prefer to indulge in fantasies about the *sinaunang* or original Filipino who predates all contact with the world outside and who, as an enduring moron, roams on in the present without offering any hold on the process of Philippine becoming.

Probably, the challenge of History is a cup too big to swallow in a culture that, according to Joaquin, is distinguished by its “Heritage of Smallness”. Filipinos identify with community, relatives, family and friends. In this person-centered area, Filipino civilization is authentic and alive; the world beyond is vague, not reassuring, even as people, willy-nilly, need it. This is complemented by the deficiency of an exemplary center of leading ideas, such as an ideology of nationhood, a doctrine of state, or a credible narrative of becoming that would mold Filipinos into an imagined community. In other words, in the absence of an overarching Great Tradition, the little tradition of the life-world defines identity.

Everyday existence, from the communal down to the familial, is trusted; the big world outside, borderless and un-survey-able, spells what Habermas called *die neue Unübersichtlichkeit* (1985) or the “new obscurity” characteristic of contemporary existence; it inspires uncertainty, anxiety and moral vacuity. In Part 1, this condition will be illustrated by a diagnosis of “our times” that impels the world-wide revival of religion and individual-centered religious identity.

Part 2 draws inspiration from Joaquin’s “Heritage of Smallness” (2004). Whereas many nations take pride in being part of one or another great civilization, the Filipino has been standing his ground, in spite of centuries of contact with the West. As a result, prevailing moral consciousness remained “little-traditional” and ignores things “national” or “public”.

Put differently, the American Great Tradition that was imposed on the Islands exists in a vacuum and is not organically connected to lowland Christian culture; the two do not inspire each other and fail to articulate. This disjuncture of ideas is at the root of grave cultural problems, such as doubt about national identity, self-deceiving historical fantasies, the non-development of a civil culture of the public sphere, and indifference in regard of the common weal and nation-building.

Said disjunction and its consequences naturally affect the intellectual climate that is the subject of Part 3. Whereas I’ll illustrate the mental atmosphere at personal impressions and field observations, it is most interesting to note that on www.getrealphilippines.com vivid discussions are going on about “anti-intellectualism” and all sorts of cultural and political questions.

PART 1

Modernity Begets Individual-Centered Religion

“Our Times”

The picture national artist Francesco “Frankie” Sionil Jose paints of his society is striking and shocking (excerpted from Sionil Jose 1992, 1993; Mulder 2016c). He points to the sham that passes for democracy and free press. These formally exist, yet in practice they are rotten and corrupt. As a result, the country is a tragic place where having conviction is an act of heroism. Besides, there is hardly anybody who gets excited about it anymore. It is as if people have been lobotomized by their own obstinacy. They are married to their degradation and do not want to see beyond it.

According to said novelist, this condition is bound to continue, because people have neither memory, nor sense of history, morality or identity to take pride in. Thus traitors are elected to office. Exploiters and torturers are forgotten. The powerful are admired; they are Spanish mestizos who do not intermarry with those Indio mongrels whom they consider incapable of creativity or leadership. It seems as if the country in its modern condition is beyond redemption.

Whereas said condition may be rooted in distant history, it is apparent that people are steadily losing identity, roots and dignity. They are no longer self-possessed but, in the absence of national leadership and moral guidance, overwhelmed by the forces of modernity. We simply live in “crazy times” in which people—certainly those on their way up—are corruptible by nature. Lies are held for truth, ordinary people are denied their dignity, and as almost everybody has to struggle for survival, the feeling of shame becomes a luxury. The idea of moral order has gone lost; what remains are self-centered individuals, driven by greed or the desire for power, violence or anger, gullibility or ignorance.

In the absence of cultural identity or continuity, anything goes—no matter how outrageous. Posturing and hypocrisy have been elevated to forms of art that pervade life and are instrumental in playing politics. After all, what people believe to be true is true and, in these uncertain, lonely times, people pin their hopes on irrational beliefs. Others simply seek escape from the harshness of existence or from their own confusion. These are golden times for soothsayers, amulet vendors and sectarian cult bosses.

When Jose writes about how the tentacles of the oligarchy reach through the whole of society, yeah, even into the classroom, he observes that the only things that count are money and power (Sionil Jose 1993). Morally, the social edifice has become an empty shell; as a result, culture, civilization is violated. Instead of assumed Oriental spirituality, we see the shameless mix of business and politics presided over by rapacious elite incapable of, and uninterested in, providing moral leadership. On the contrary, they corrupt society, rendering both olden ways and modern ideals irrelevant.

Towards Religious Individualism

The original Filipino denomination of the Iglesia ni Cristo demands discipline of its devotees, who even vote *en bloc* for their church's preferred candidates. It builds upon its members' mandatory tithes and presence at services twice a week, of which attendance records are kept. Members absent for any length of time are visited by a deacon who will attempt to convince them once again that there is no salvation outside of the Iglesia.

Theologically and in its militant propagation of the faith, the Iglesia reminds of Jehovah's Witnesses. It tries to persuade through eclectic biblical citations, but rejects the divinity of Christ. Stressing purity, worldly discipline and exclusivity, it has all the characteristics of a brotherhood of the few who have been "chosen" among a humanity that is on its way to eternal doom.

Drawing on dissatisfaction within the Catholic Church, this militant sect has made deep inroads into the flock of Rome. Now, a good hundred years after its foundation, it may probably count close to ten percent of the urban population, at least on the island of Luzon. Its typical members are literate, mainly urban lower middle class. Generally speaking, it is a church for the common man; even so, an increasing proportion of people of higher educational standing can be found among the congregation.

The mainstream Catholic Church addresses a slightly higher situated public of professionals, office workers and urban politicians. Among them, members of Opus Dei constitute a select influential circle. Many more in this public are members of the Knights of Columbus, an urban confraternity of notables often referred to as the bishop's bank as they fund Episcopal projects. It is from among such circles that *cursillistas*—people willing to go through an intensive three-day confrontation with the faith (*cursillo*)—are drawn. Similarly, these also constitute the recruitment base for retreats, marriage revival weekends at resort hotels, and suchlike activities.

Most people who come to Mass, however, are not hooked into such networks and are not committed to the Church. For them, the Church is a powerhouse to recharge their battery and their devotions, novenas, prayers, vows, pilgrimages, processions and sacrifices are meant to secure personal benefits. They may, therefore, just as likely put their trust in a favorite saint, an amulet or turn to one of the thriving charismatic movements—among whom El Shaddai and Jesus is Lord currently stand out—that promise devotees to share in God's power, which results in miracle cures, finding work, prosperity and other blessings.

Middle-class frustration with contemporary conditions may be expressed through appeals for political reform and a religion-tinged way of life, which can be sufficiently annoying to the establishment. As a result, the latter may grant concessions and will try to subvert or co-opt the foremen concerned. In order to maintain their moral stature, these should be so wise as to dissociate themselves from government whose power corrupts. The leadership of the Iglesia ni Cristo provides a case in point. Adept at political bargaining, it selects its favorite candi-

dates when elections are in the offing without committing itself to actual politics, a position made clear by the Iglesia's refusal to take up the two seats it was offered on the commission that drafted the post-Marcos Constitution of 1987.

Likewise, and despite their frustration, most members of the middle classes are cynical about the prospect of political reform and are not committed to public affairs, yet often serious about religion as a means to put their own house in order. Similarly, devout Catholics who go to Mass every day, participate in nocturnal adoration groups or are involved in the Legion of Mary may be influenced by the preferences of the Church's hierarchy, but are primarily motivated to express themselves through an ethical way of life and strict adherence to religious injunctions.

Practicing religion is an individual affair, yet linked to the conviction that if everybody fulfills his religious duties while respecting those of other denominations, society will be in good order. This focus on individual practice draws attention away from structural roots of social process and problems, while leading to the fatalism of accepting life's circumstances as they come. This religious individualism is cozy at home with Filipino clannishness and dovetails nicely with a patrimonial perception of wider society, a distrust of critical social analysis and, ultimately, elite interests. Whereas occasional protest surfaces and some social concern is channeled into the activities of civil-society organizations, religion has the advantage of marking one's personal identity with claims to righteousness and protective blessing.

The emergence of a multitude of upwardly mobile people in a market-driven environment where moral teachings of old have lost relevance is a novel phenomenon, resulting in a contingent experience of life. People so affected may safeguard their personhood through finding a hold in life. In this quest, membership in exclusive, brotherhood-like sects that promise individual salvation, or participation in so-called New Religious Movements, appear to lead the way, while others justify their existence through observing a religion-inspired way of life. Others still set on secular ways to shape identity and indulge in life-styling, the goodies of consumer culture and the excesses their money permits. Sometimes, they choose a religion-tinged lifestyle if that is fashionable, and often it is.

In many respects, religion is a child of the times. While for some it provides a fundamental epistemic framework, for others it is more ornamental. Sometimes the ornamental and the epistemic combine in distinguishable lifestyles, such as expressed in the characteristic architecture of the *Iglesia ni Cristo*. Charismatics and born-again within and without denominations put their mark on conversation, greeting all and sundry with "God bless you", while frequently interspersing their sentences with "Praise the Lord" and "Halleluiah", even when they are not attempting to convert their interlocutor.

Apart from this, religion may provide entertainment that draws happy crowds. Catholicism's colorful carnivals and processions, fiestas and ceremonies have always enjoyed massive popularity, with locals as well as tourists. Accordingly, it was no surprise that the Philippine Church's celebrations of the Holy Virgin's

2000th birthday in 1985 became a real party at which huge birthday cakes were carried around to the cheers of “Happy Birthday, Mama Mary”.

In brief, religion appears to be alive and well, not only in the Philippines, but in most parts of the contemporary world—with the possible exception of Western Europe. Whereas many people take their religious duties seriously and consciously try to give shape to their faith in a world of money, materialism and urban obscurity, others do no more than attending ceremony and ritual. Yet, whatever their motivation—whether it is faith, a moral stance or a means to gain public acceptance—religion’s revival does not inspire universalism and the brotherhood of all.

With its emphasis on personal ethical behavior and the decline of early idealism, religion seems to move in the opposite direction. The broad ideas that fired the imagination of the founding fathers of modern states in the Region—constitutionalism, democracy, education for all, social justice, rule of law—have gradually vanished from the popular imagination and have been replaced by the creed of economic development, with its stress on money, technology and material success. The religious upsurge is partly a reaction to the amoral rule of money and a response to the ethical vacuity of the wider environment. The ideals of nation-building and active citizenship have faded in an anonymous scene ruled by political and economic expediency where people strive for survival, caring for themselves and their immediate dependents only. As a result, civil society ideals, such as responsibility for and active participation in a shared public world, have difficulty in taking root and may be outclassed by religious righteousness with its promise of individual salvation.

Rulers and elite politicians continue to conceive of social arrangements in patrimonial ways; their position at the top of the pile is seen as a natural state of affairs, legitimized through notions of hierarchy and moral inequality. Whereas this once led to the obligation of extending protective patronage, the commodification of relationships has since long eroded its practice. These days, the high and mighty jealously guard their position of privilege against claims of others. To them, individual-centered religion comes in handy. Add to this the replacement of “the Nation” by state and market, and the particularistic reaction to modernity logically follows. People care for themselves, especially their families, which justifies any profit-taking in the “public” world to boot.

Family ideology, with its concomitant demands of loyalty, obligation and respect for age certainly does not contradict the prevailing understanding of religion. This is reinforced by pinning down sin in concrete bonds, most crucially in parent-child relationships. Not respecting or going against parents constitute the cardinal transgression that causes feelings of guilt and that will be punished by unavoidable supernatural retribution (*mabusong*). Beyond the core of the family, however, religion is primarily seen as the means of securing protection, blessing and good fortune. It is directed to the future and not concerned with a sinful past.

Religion and Modernity

Modernity begets individual-centered religion that allows for creatively adopting and subversively rejecting features of both modernity and religion. This characteristic open-endedness, in which everything is possible, keeps pace with the escalating contingencies of everyday life, so giving shape to Habermas's "new obscurity" as sign and symbol of modernity. At the level of the individual, this means being subjected to precarious situations and social dislocations with increased frequency, which greatly stimulates the vitality and versatility of religion, inclusive of mysticism, meditation, spiritual yoga, ancestor worship, magic, faith-healing rallies, spirit cults, mediums and trance, and so on. There seems to be no limit to contemporary religiously-tinged practices, to which it has been observed that spirits and all the beliefs that surround them are pleasantly flexible; whereas they do not escape from the wide realm of religion, they are impervious to dogma and doctrine. As a result, they can accommodate to any circumstance of the human condition (Endres & Lauser 2011).

Willy-nilly, individuals must deal with the "new obscurity" of a world beyond their grasp. Overwhelmed by technology, capitalism, inexorable new means and factory-made culture, the satisfaction of home-made and experience-near products and performances has been driven out. Concretely, videoke drove out the guitar, mechanical noise the choir, television home-made entertainment. In this way, the individual quest for personal; syncretistic; new; identity and moral worth-confirming "religion" is fuelling the quest for "salvation" and security, and, above all, for the life-giving poetics of fantasy, dream, wonder and creation. This is "what people have religion for"; they simply need it. Adapted to the contemporary condition, it becomes a "modern tradition" that functions as the "antipode" to life set in the contingencies of Economy, Technology, "Modernity", etc. As a result, we find a supermarket supply of means to respond to the contingencies of experience, from religiously driven terrorism to new spirit cults, and from trance, possession and magic to scripturalism, fundamentalism and holier-than-thou sects. Consequently, individual psychological needs should be considered as a cardinal driving force of the world-wide vitality of Religion.

PART 2

Smallness Triumphant: The Filipino Pioneer

Introduction

The idea of smallness refers to Nick Joaquin's "Heritage of Smallness" that would be the mainstay characteristic of Filipino existence. Whereas many nations take pride in being part of one or another great civilization, the Filipino has been standing his ground, in spite of centuries of contact with the Great Tradition of the West. Meanwhile, with the haze of the "new obscurity" choking the clarity of people's

civilizational identity, the tendency to retreat to what is intimately familiar is spreading and retrospectively justifies the Filipinos' stubborn holding on to their heritage of smallness. It is fair to credit the Filipino people with pioneering this possibility.

The Little and the Great Traditions of Philippine Civilization

Within the wide scope of a civilization as a far-flung "system" of dominant ideas, we'll find local little traditions characteristic of everyday life and praxis, and the overarching Great Tradition (Redfield 1956 and 1962). Normally, both traditions bear the mark of earlier days, at the same time that the great tradition qualifies the civilization concerned as a whole. If we take Western civilization as an instance of an ever-evolving Great Tradition, we see that it has grown from recognizable roots in the past into a "system" of incredible complexity, within which competing ideologies and various branches of Christianity, many literary and artistic traditions, science and humanism could develop. Within its vast scope, locally based civilizations developed on the basis of standards that, on the one hand, hark back to early Greek and Roman sources, and that have, on the other, been elaborated and localized through incorporating old traditions and historical accident in a vernacular canon with which the relevant literati and intelligentsia are familiar. As a result, it is fair to speak of, for instances, French, North-American and Russian civilizations as expressions of the Western Great Tradition.

The Great Tradition of the Philippines consists of canonical Catholicism and the world of ideas of the North-American branch of Western civilization. At the time the Spaniards arrived, there was nothing in terms of a common civilization or a political system that tied the islands and its multifarious populations together. There merely existed semi-self-contained local traditions that may have shared certain characteristics, even as the various populations were divided among each other and among themselves. Whatever unity evolved was the product of Spanish colonization; culturally, such unity resulted from the propagation of Hispanicized Catholic Christianity. Over the long colonial period, the latter could sink in and be filipinized, resulting in a Catholicism that became a symbolic representation of family relationships (Mulder 1997). By the latter part of the 19th century, a distinct lowland Christian culture had evolved and secular European ideas obtained their foothold among the budding intelligentsia, the so-called *ilustrados*.

As custodians of Catholicism, Spanish friars tended to guard their monopoly of knowledge. When they left at the demise of Spanish empire, the Church suffered a heavy loss of prestige and little remained of canonical Catholicism. Contrarily, grounded Catholicism was a folk religion, very short on personnel that, in the absence of clerical control, became its own measure. Because of the American separation of church and state, religion also lost its legitimizing functions in relation to the state that henceforward founded on democracy, liberty and constitutionalism. However, whereas Catholicism had shaped and adapted itself to the practice and ethics of Philippine life, American ideas about political procedure, rule of law and

the order of public space have remained dissonant to everyday praxis, even as they are recognized as exemplary.

Through energetic promotion of secular education and English, the Americans easily won the cultural battle. By the 1920s, the Spanish order and the reactions it provoked, such as nationalism and even literature in Tagalog, had lost out and were rapidly retreating, which resulted in a generation of America-oriented students who had lost their anchor in the past. The Great Tradition the Americans brought was eagerly and uncritically accepted but could, in such short time, not be absorbed, adapted or become exemplary for the home-grown traditions of the life-world. It remained a strange set of ideas, a measuring rod irrelevant to life as it is lived.

Basically, the Americans introduced a set of ideas about the order of the public sphere, about government and politics. Through rapidly delegating administrative and political power to the economic and educated elites, a ruling class was brought into existence for which independence and nationalism ceased to be profitable issues once the Commonwealth was inaugurated (1935). As of then, American ideas about good government and the imperativeness of nation-building degenerated to opportunistic rhetoric. By appropriating the 'public' sphere as its private backyard, the elite aborted the American legacy, so splitting the potential nation into privileged and commoners, while encasing each segment in its own life-world tradition.

Put differently, the American Great-Traditional legacy exists in a vacuum and is not naturally connected to lowland Christian culture; the two do not inspire each other and fail to articulate. This disjuncture of the ideas that guide Great and local traditions is the cause of grave cultural problems, such as perennial uncertainty about Filipino national identity and the related bent for self-denigration (Mulder 2015). As a result, Filipinos live with historical falsification and fail to articulate the common weal in a convincing national doctrine.

In the Philippines, the nominal acceptance of the North-American Great Tradition opens the country up to the world outside. As a result, most members of the power elite and an open-minded intelligentsia are multilingual, participate in international cultural life and accept such openness as a matter-of-course. They discourse in terms of a dominant culture to which they are provincial and dearly lack an idiom grounded in their national being. Normally, they are ignorant of home-grown literature, whether in the vernacular or English, with the exception of the school-taught lines of Balagtas and Jose Rizal. If historically conscious, they are radically divided in interpretation.

Generally, the political elite creates a nation through propagating a narrative of national becoming, backed up by emotion-laden symbols and institutions. The elite concerned may also choose not to do so. Instilling national consciousness and ideology, or effective nation-statehood and cultural self-sufficiency seems to go against the very interest of the ruling class. In order to understand its world of ideas or the dominant ideas propagated in school and media, we need to understand its historical position in the political economy.

The ruling elite, the so-called “old oligarchy” has its roots in the Spanish colonial period and consists of a mixture of Filipinos, Chinese and Spaniards. The Americans gave what it demanded from Spain, that is, political power. This power reinforced its grip on the means of production, especially land. Colonial history justifies and legitimizes its position, such as expressed with the prominent Stars-and-Stripes in the picture of the transfer of independence in 1946 to President Roxas that features on the 1986-issued hundred-peso bill. Nowadays, the elite is largely English-speaking, culturally bi-national, oriented to the outside, and often trained at American universities.

No wonder that the example it sets leads to negative appreciation of things Philippine which is even expressed in approved school texts (Doronila 1986; Mulder 2000, 2014). Naturally, foreign products, especially “state-side” are preferred. Together, this is known as “our colonial mentality” that is reinforced by the free-for-all propagation of “American lifestyles” in the media and a consumerism that is dressed up in American mass-cultural symbols. As a result, the capital Metro Manila merely represents the phraseology and politics of self-serving elite and a mushrooming mass culture that should in no way be seen as expressive of the overarching idea of “Nation”.

Of course, there are people who deplore this situation. There are the various cliques of militant nationalists whose inbreeding or person-centered exclusivity fosters controversy rather than meaningful discourse. They promote causes as diverse as “the national language”, anti-Americanism, popular democracy, Marxist analysis, regional cultural expressions versus Manila-centeredness, or grand designs for re-education. Whoever they are, all of them deplore the cultural dominance of the United States. Even so, to be educated still means fluency in English and familiarity with Western civilization. In terms of a Great Tradition, there is no alternative, and so the “nationalism” the militants propagate suffers from an inner contradiction, and from the failure of developing a visionary discourse that brings the nation as a whole to life. So, in parallel with official quarters such as the Department of Education, the “nationalists” do not provide cultural leadership, and so Philippine life remains devoid of an indigenous exemplary center.

The heart of lowland Christian culture lies in the little tradition of home and locality. There one finds the shared and distinctive symbols that express the Filipino ethos. These symbols belong to individual families and communities, such as the diplomas on the wall, graduation pictures, the cute Santo Niño, the serene Lady of Lourdes or the stark Mother of Perpetual Help, the plaza with its diminutive Rizal statue, the town hall and the church, the basketball court, the band, the bus waiting shed (donated by a politician or a Rotary clique), the fiesta and processions.

All these symbols do not refer to a center of culture. As little-traditional Filipino expressions of the vast sway of Western civilization, they merely refer to themselves and do not transcend their referent. Up to the present, therefore, lowland culture is expressed in a concrete style of life rather than in the more abstract “imagined community” of the nation as encompassing moral order.

Summarily, it is fair to conclude that Philippine culture as we know it today developed from tribalism to a nation-wide, family and community-based little tradition that, according to Pertierra (2002: 74), ensures a strong sense of self rooted in practical life; there life is taken-for-granted and beyond question, at the same time that it results in a sense of identity that is limited by its lack of self-consciousness.

PART 3

Intellectual Climate

My students do not want to think, they want to pass in order to land a job. They are not curious. People here just want to smile and forget to use their head. (Lecturer at an autonomous university.)

Another teacher's opinion

The problem is that, in despite of the number of students who excel with their grades in Philippine schools, we have yet to find a Filipino student who can inspire innovation or defy conventional wisdom in Philippine society. As I have pointed out in previous articles, despite the many brilliant students produced each year by Philippine universities, the country has yet to produce someone who can inspire "greatness".

Where can we find the great Filipino inventor? Where is our own Steve Jobs or Mark Zuckerberg? Where is the next Jose Rizal who is going to wake the majority of Filipinos from their long stupor? They are not in the Philippines because the society does not encourage individuals to stand out from the crowd and be unique [or, popularly, to be a nerd]. Everyone has to put their head down lest they get ostracized for being too "different" or in the local vernacular *walang pakisama* [not getting along with others].

Philippine society also discourages individuals from expressing their dissenting opinion. I know this because I get accused of being a "paid hack" for criticizing Filipino politicians. It would be hard to find a teacher who doesn't limit freedom of expression in class. As a matter of fact, students are taught to show deference to older people or to those who are in authority, including their teachers. Young kids are discouraged from questioning them. This is precisely the reason why timid behavior prevails and why many Filipinos are too sensitive to criticism and people who have differing opinions.

Competition is part of the process of producing innovative and unique individuals. Without it, people will lack the motivation to strive harder to succeed. In the Philippines, however, students are told what to think and not how to think; as a result, the use of critical thinking is not so common in the country. (Ilda.)¹

Early impressions

In the orienting phase of field research, newspaper reading was a daily chore. I remember the item on the handsome dividend Araneta University was paying its stock-holders. Coming from the Netherlands, I was shocked; providing education in order to make money was distasteful. I also learned that the country boasted some 1450 institutions bestowing bachelor degrees, often in subjects that would not qualify as academic in Western Europe. Next to this, I noted that all sorts of craftsmen, opticians for one, shamelessly put “Dr.” in front of their names, often adding a gamut of unheard of distinctions, and that those practicing law were routinely addressed as “attorney”.

Reconnoitering in 1983, I was soon irritated by inescapable noise, whether in public conveyances, restaurants, malls or streets; it made the Philippines the most clamorous country I ever experienced. So, go to the library to find peace to read. In Lucena City—my research site—the municipal lib displayed “Do not let it be you who people will point out as destroying the quiet”. This admonition was backed up by the sound of an inane noon-time show on television, while some personnel entertained themselves with the titter of transistor radios on their desks.

On bus, in park or on campus, it struck as weird to see somebody reading a book, with the remarkable exception of the *kantinera* of the students’ canteen. The aversion of reading is highlighted by the absence of real bookstores. Whereas, in Manila, I found my way to three small shops that qualify for the distinction, so-called “bookstores” normally sell school and office supplies, complemented with sundry merchandise that has no relation to reading.

After a total of five month “in the field”, I ventured to circulate a preliminary working paper, *All Filipinos Go to Heaven* (Mulder 1987); it attracted an avalanche of responses and was approvingly referred to in the so-called Shahani Report, *Building a People, Building a Nation. A Moral Recovery Program*. The Report’s wordy impressionism—the weaknesses of the Filipinos are extreme personalism, extreme family-centeredness, lack of discipline, foolhardiness, passivity and lack of initiative, lack of patriotism and an actual preference for things foreign, a selfish, self-serving attitude, insensitivity to the common good, lack of self-analysis and self-reflection (1988: 4-7)—reminds of what I then wrote:

Although rich in words, the intellectual standard of the media shines through in shallow journalism and the political use of words. Although the Philippines takes pride in high literacy, books do not sell, newspaper circulation is limited, authors remain poor, and in Lucena City, it is difficult to buy a novel or a college reader. The least frequented room of its local university (8.000 students) is the poorly equipped library. Campus discussion and controversy are actively discouraged; teaching content is transmitted by dictation and fixed by rote learning. Whereas the country produces a steady stream of fine minds, from Balagtas, del Pilar, Rizal and Mabini to Recto, de la Costa, Constantino and Joaquin, the development of their wit cannot be attributed to a rooted tradition of learning.

Many colleges and universities are mere diplomas mills, staffed by overworked teachers who are poorly paid for teaching loads of 30 to 42 hours a week. Yet people have a high regard for education and parents sacrifice to see the graduation pictures of their offspring in academic gown and mortar board.

In the absence of serious discussion, slipshod journalism, asinine noontime shows on television, political rhetoric, dictations, religion and delightful Filipino self-mockery reign supreme. The “mis-education” of the Filipino [Constantino 1966] draws attention away from self and home while emulating foreign examples; this is most clearly expressed in the culture of the “bi-national” elite whose cultural capital lies way across the ocean, resulting in a dependent mentality, expressed in alien forms. It would be ludicrous to expect that such elite would take cultural responsibility and promote a national identity that inspires hope and pride in country. As a result, there is no positive counteracting of the unrestrained commercialization of media that offer advertising rather than reflection and critical socio-political analysis; what remains, is a vast market for mass-cultural entertainment that draws attention away from the issues that should really matter [currently, this is demonstrated through the AlDub tele-novela and personal identification with its characters].

The Filipinos I came to know were almost invariably nice, kind and sympathetic people who rarely tried to take advantage of me and whose cordiality was sometimes embarrassing. They seemed to enjoy jocular and congenial association in a sphere of relaxation. Within shades of distance and intimacy, I ventured that this style expresses un-self-consciousness as the desired state of being.

This attitude fosters acceptance of life as it comes; one lives in and with and not over and against a “public” environment that is divorced from life that really matters, from family and interpersonal relationships. As a result, the wider setting poses no obstacle to the dominance of mass cultural life with its indifference to social problems and active citizenship; taking the latter two seriously is mere luxury where mental vagueness, a dysfunctional educational system, fully commercialized media and an apathetic government prevail. (Mulder 1987.)

Nosy Parker

Whereas my preliminary paper *All Filipinos Go to Heaven* (Mulder 1987) drew an avalanche of positive observations, ironic corrections and constructive criticism, further research and deepening understanding resulted in a defensive attitude of many colleagues and informants. This can only be expected: the closer one gets to the heart of things, the more one is felt to be a Nosy Parker who peeps behind the scenes, who is intrusive and even wants to discuss the things he sees with the people concerned! He blusters into the privacy of his informants who often let him know that he should respectfully stay out of their affairs. I was quite upset when this happened to a reputable social analyst cum UP professor with whom I had developed a cordial relationship during my early research; from then on, however, I was no longer invited to share lunch at his home on campus. It was the tell-tale sign that I was on track.

Things really came to a head when, in 1990, I circulated *Appreciating Lowland Christian Filipino Culture* (Mulder 1990). This time, however, most reactions were

not constructive; instead, I was advised to stop with my research; my case was hopeless. The last chapter of this compound paper, “Symbolizing the Polity in the Philippines”—which I, upon rereading, still find humorous and to the point—was lambasted by the editor of “Solidarity” as “your perceptions of this nation have been so colored by your ulcers, you have failed as a scholar, and failed miserably”.

Among the social-science faculty at UP—who, according to Ateneo Professor Bulatao, S.J., mistake nationalism for science—the reception was a tempest. For instance, the chapter “The Great and the Little Tradition of the Philippines” drew the Dean’s tart comment “there is nothing little about the Philippines”. This in spite of the fact that the exemplary culture of Philippine everyday life is the, by definition, little-traditional ideology of family life—it is even enshrined in the Constitution of 1987—which results in the moralistic perception of things social.

Anthropology Professor Covar invited me to introduce my paper in his class, and so I went to Diliman campus in the hope of gathering critical comments. At the appointed venue, I found a note on the door, “Regret! I am indisposed. I’ll not meet my class today... It would have been reacted ‘violently’”. Had he read the paper beforehand, I could have spared that trip, even as without the “indisposed”, I would have enjoyed getting to know what students were taught to think. The outright refusal to further discuss became clear when the Dean refused to accept a subsequent paper; he pushed it back into my hands with the remark “this is for European consumption”.

So much for the intellectual climate among the so-called filipinologists at the foremost state university who have, regrettably, deeply influenced the substance of the teaching of history and social subjects. Thank goodness there are others not blindfolded by nationalism and related myth-making. An Ateneo-based Filipino Jesuit observed, “This is a very perceptive paper. I agree with most of what it says. My few problems of it would be in details.”

Anti-Intellectualism

The fundamental cause of anti-intellectualism may well lie among woe school inflicts on the hapless students through forestalling clear thinking. Naturally, people think in their vernacular that schooling should subsequently foster in order to train critical reasoning. Only then, normally in the fifth grade, second languages can be absorbed without muddling thought. In the Philippines, however, the premature introduction of English causes a permanent state of confusion through not cultivating the students’ mother-tongue first. At the autonomous university in Lucena City, students joke that their mastery of English is no better than *Carabao English*, water-buffalo English. When they are allowed to formulate in their native Tagalog, even I, Nosy Parker, can point out the inaccuracies. The home language has been neglected, persists as conversational and remains unfit for intellectual discourse, at the same time that English has been insufficiently developed.

Whereas there is no shortage of people who have studied at reputable American universities, most of them avoid intellectual exchanges with outsiders and foreigners, and show a dislike for ideological dialogue. Most often, they are averse of

critical exchanges, even as many zestfully indulge in rhetoric. The flowers in the flourishing field of cause-orientation stand on their own, so to say: “Two Pinoys means two NGOs” is the standard joke. Whereas they seemingly address similar societal problems, they shy away from getting their act together in an overarching frame, particularly because of person-centered leadership.

It reminds of the opinion pages of the English language press that address issues in an *ad hoc* fashion that is never followed up by “investigative” journalism, as such reflecting the spineless social teachings in school. It is as if sociology still needs to be invented while seeking safety in conservatism and familial moralism. Whereas Rizal—our national hero!—shines as a keen social analyst, his translated writings are further demolished through using them for the study of Filipino/Tagalog. Adding insult to injury, school teaches that Filipinos are irresponsible, imitative, improvident, indolent, and dislike manual labor, have no self-respect, are not self-reliant and indulge in inferiority feelings. With such journalism and training, anti-intellectualism can only be expected.

Because of all this and in spite of many exchanges with a limited number of outstanding intellectuals, in comparison with my researches in Thailand and on Java, I found myself in an intellectual desert. Whereas in the former two faculty and students steadily demanded intellectual stimulation, over more than thirty years in the Philippines I have only rarely been invited to deliver lectures and to enjoy subsequent questions and discussions.

Popular Opinion about “Anti-Intellectualism”

In the quest for the deeper roots of this attitude, it is often observed that Filipinos feel uneasy with individual tasks and that reading, studying and ambition are discouraged within the family, especially if these do not lead to economic advantage. Moreover, instead of curiosity, respect for authority and complying with family obligations is fostered among children. They do not value knowledge, just the college certificate that allows one to find a secure job. As a result, education as such is not an entry to high social status. To enjoy the latter, a person needs success, fame and money.

Anti-intellectualism feeds on the continuous need to be entertained, be it with karaoke, tele-novelas or following the private lives of the rich and famous. People evade problems and derive comfort from celebrating ignorance, seeing high intelligence as a negative trait. Let us follow the highly acclaimed opinion of Julia Jasmine Madrazo-Sta Romana in her “Smart-shaming and our Pinoy culture of anti-intellectualism”:

If you look at popular Filipino culture, there’s a pervasive thread that seems to celebrate ignorance. I’m not saying that we Filipinos are dumb or that we don’t value knowledge or education. I’m saying that as a culture, we tend to see high intelligence as a negative trait. The best example of this would be Philippine politics. When you look at the elections starting at the later end of the 20th century, we start seeing the word “intellectual” as an insult rather than a quality that you look

for in public servants. We see candidates downplaying their academic and career achievements to appeal to the masses.

[After giving several examples of being “too intellectual” and contrasting these with the likes of former President Erap Estrada who arrogantly celebrated his being kicked out of school, she notes that “We playfully shame people when they’re ‘too smart’ for our common tastes”. Upon this, she observes...]

It’s the same with Filipino movies and TV. The ItchyWorms catchy hit, “NoonTime Show” was actually a serious criticism of how these shows exploit and celebrate ignorance. Five of the top 10 highest grossing Filipino movies of all time are self-admitted dumb comedies that rely more on slapstick and stereotypes than witty writing for laughs. ... characters that display some degree of intelligence are either smart-shamed or portrayed as villains. What we value is conformity, empathy and social relationships, by themselves common traits among Asian countries. (Madrazo-Sta Romana 2015.)

In his *Hindsight*, F. Sionil Jose addresses the question “why are we shallow?” (2011) After giving an example of admiration for things facile, he scores points when noting “the nincompoops that are elected to high office because of popularity, of having a well-known name without being questioned about their qualifications”. It is reflected in the irresponsible media that offer no food for thought.

This corresponds with an educational system that does not foster scholarship, let alone the quest for excellence. The curriculum shies away from the humanities, especially history and philosophy, which results in a people without a past or without the memory necessary to build a nation. Another consequence of this neglect is that simple knowledge is taken for wisdom and that quantities of ego-driven know-it-alls shine in and on the media without any restraint or humility. Such are the ones who bluster their way to the top at the expense of the vast majority who will then suffer their arrogance and ignorance. It blatantly demonstrates the absence of self-knowledge, of knowing one’s limits and the inability of accepting criticism.

In the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* of July 14, 2015, John Nery asks the question “Filipinos, what are we doing wrong?” In step with what many Filipinos observe, he then notes that a huge number of Filipinos abroad make the grade or even excel in their jobs and command the admiration of the people they are working among, be it in hospital or bank, design or architecture. Yet, back home such excellence is hard to find.

Upon this, Nery notes the miserable circumstances, the political rigmarole, the corruption, the absence of discipline, the sluggish development of infrastructure, the privileged upper class that behaves as if the country is theirs and theirs alone, and the glaring truth that citizens are aware that their country is being left behind. Even Cambodia and Vietnam overtook the Philippines in poverty reduction!

In conclusion, he suggests the four deadly habits that lead to the anarchy and misery of life in the Philippines. In the first place, he notes that people think and behave as if the rules are not fixed, and even if they were, they would not apply in the home country. Secondly, a kind of fatalism—in which I, NM, recognize so-called

“Filipino tolerance”—that accepts what is wrong in the belief that nothing can be done about it anyway. Thirdly, Filipinos are selectively proud to the point of racism; in other words, they are incomparable and constitute their own measure. As a result, as deadly habit four has it, as a people Filipinos lack national ambition.

Comfort in ignorance

Long before I ever thought of doing research in the Philippines, eminent historian William Henry Scott (1984) observed that teaching falsehood and myth about Philippine history is self-defeating, because such teaching can never result in positive feelings of national identity and pride; on the contrary, it may merely result in ignorance and indifference. Quite a few Filipino historians and Jesuits have since commented on the untenable nonsense and perpetual sham taught in school that deprives young Filipinos of all sense of history. What they should be taught is the fascinating and constructive saga of Philippine becoming that would stimulate feelings of national identity and pride, while providing a solid base for the teaching of all social subjects. However this may be, keeping students ignorant seems to be more comfortable and in line with the prevailing intellectual climate.

SUMMARY OF EXPLORATION

Filipinos are proud of being a happy-go-lucky society and make it a point to show the rest of the world that they are coping with smiling faces despite the dire circumstances they face. This mentality shows that Filipinos are satisfied with mediocrity and find striving for excellence too daunting. A few remaining Filipinos who want to engage in a more serious discussions are even labeled “kill-joy” or “librarians.” Aside from their penchant for bullying when others don’t engage in “pakikisama,” Filipinos indeed, have a tendency to discriminate against more sober ways of tackling solutions. (Ilda.)

In exploring the disturbing subject of demotivation, I am struck by, on the one hand individual-centeredness in a non-coherent nation chronically dissatisfied with its government, and on the other a set of factors that seem to support Joaquin’s complaint of the Filipino aversion of challenges; “Do not stand out!” seems to be the imperative; “Don’t make yourself special by achieving”; “Engage in *pakikisama*”, that is, in smoothly getting along with each other and giving in to peer pressure. Such comportment jibes with the ways of family life and a manner of socialization that produces relatively lowly individuated individuals (see Mulder 2011); as a personality type, such individuals are outwardly directed, interdependent, and given to a *bahala na* or “come what may” attitude of fatalism and resignation; almost naturally, such characteristics lead to intolerance of others who insist on going their own way. These are held to be nerds, to cause stress in others, i.e., to nose-bleed them; pulling them back into everyday mediocrity and conformity is blithely acknowledged as “our crab mentality”.

Keep it this way! Suffer it, put on a smile and don't rock the boat! Ah, "Filipino tolerance", a many-splendored thing indeed. In this vein, we have to tolerate the perpetuation of "mis-education", nowadays not because of the colonial school curriculum, but because of willful historical falsification and unending misinformation. Under the banner "A losing battle to improve textbooks", this practice was highlighted in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* of September 14, 2015 as "Sick schools" with "sick textbooks written in Carabao English" (Mundo 2015). I disagree with the idea of "battle"; this situation is endemic and another proof of not picking up the gauntlet that has been thrown down umpteen times since the mid-1960s. It is the comfort of apathy and self-deceit.

Condensed, it boils down to "the heritage of smallness"; Filipinos are people without history, have to do without an integrative narrative, without an overarching Great Tradition, and so their mental horizon is limited to those who are personally known and shies away from flying high. It is the familiar that is real in an obscure, anarchic wide world that fosters inconsiderateness and that is nationally represented by populist, self-seeking politicians. No wonder that those who are driven by ambition—other than grabbing and corrupting—export themselves to shores where their drive is positively appreciated. Go to Facebook or www.getrealphilippines.com to read what I as foreign Nosy Parker am not allowed to repeat!

Note

1. Pseudonym of female columnist of www.getrealphilippines.com.

References

- Building a People, Building a Nation. A Moral Recovery Program*, 1988, Quezon City: Instructional Materials Corporation.
- CONSTANTINO, Renato, 1966, "The Mis-education of the Filipino", in *The Filipino in the Philippines and Other Essays*, Renato Constantino, Quezon City: Malaya Books, pp. 39-65.
- DORONILA, M.L.C., 1986, "The Nature, Organization and Sources of Students' National Identity Orientations", in *Towards Relevant Education*, Education Forum, ed., Quezon City: Association of Major Religious Superiors in the Philippines, pp. 53-80.
- ENDRES, Kirsten W. & Andrea LAUSER, ed., 2011, *Engaging the Spirit World: Popular Beliefs and Practices in Modern Southeast Asia*, New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- FALLOWS, James, 1987, "A Damaged Culture; A New Philippines", *The Atlantic Monthly*, November: 49-58.
- HABERMAS, Jürgen, 1985, *Die neue Unübersichtlichkeit. Kleine politische Schriften*, Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp.

- JOAQUIN, Nick, 2004 [1988], *Culture and History*, Mandaluyong City: Anvil Publishing Inc. chapters "The American Interlude", pp. 315-29; "A Heritage of Smallness", pp. 351-67.
- MADRAZO-STA ROMANA, Julia Jasmine, 2015, "Smart-Shaming and our Pinoy Culture of Anti-Intellectualism", July 6, 2015, <http://www.gmanetwork.com/news/story/517026/scitech/science/smart-shaming-and-our-pinoy-culture-of-anti-intellectualism>.
- MULDER, Niels, 1987, *All Filipinos Go to Heaven. Preliminary Working Paper*, University of Bielefeld: Sociology of Development Research Centre.
- MULDER, Niels, 1990, *Appreciating Lowland Christian Filipino Culture. Working Paper 141*, University of Bielefeld: Sociology of Development Research Centre.
- MULDER, Niels, 1997, *Inside Philippine Society. Interpretations of Everyday Life*, Quezon City: New Day Publishers.
- MULDER, Niels, 2000, "History and Society", in *Filipino Images. Culture of the Public World*, Niels Mulder, Quezon City: New Day Publishers, pp. 72-102.
- MULDER, Niels, 2011, "The Crux is the Skin: Reflections on Southeast Asian Personhood", *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 1: 95-116.
- MULDER, Niels, 2014, "The Filipino Social Imagination in Regional Context", *Asia-Pacific Social Science Review*, 14, 2: 112-126.
- MULDER, Niels, 2015, "Filipino Identity: The Haunting Question", *Sabangan*, 1: 19-30.
- MULDER, Niels, 2016a, "Sovereign Cultural Analysis", *Sabangan*, 2: 127-133.
- MULDER, Niels, 2016b, "Dare to Be Filipino", in *Life in the Philippines. Contextual Essays on Filipino Being*, Niels Mulder, Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, pp. 251-255.
- MULDER, Niels, 2016c, "Nation and Society in Fiction", in *Life in the Philippines. Contextual Essays on Filipino Being*, Niels Mulder, Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, pp. 111-119.
- MUNDO, Fernando del, 2015, "A Losing Battle to Improve Textbooks", *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, September 14th, 2015, available on <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/721749/a-losing-battle-to-improve-textbooks>.
- NERY, John, 2015, "Filipinos, What are We Doing Wrong?", *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, July 14, 2015, available on <http://opinion.inquirer.net/86685/filipinos-what-are-we-doing-wrong>.
- PERTIERRA, Raul, 2002, *The work of culture*, Manila: De la Salle University Press.
- REDFIELD, Robert, 1956, "The Social Organization of Tradition", in *Peasant Society and Culture. An Anthropological Approach to Civilization*, Robert Redfield, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- REDFIELD, Robert, 1962, *Human Nature and the Study of Society*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- SCOTT, William Henry, 1984, *Prehispanic Source Materials for the Study of Philippine History*, Quezon City: New Day Publishers; revised edition of 1968 dissertation.
- SIONIL JOSE, Francesco, 1992, *Three Filipino Women*, New York: Random House.

SIONIL JOSE, Francesco, 1993, *Viajero: A Filipino Novel*, Manila: Solidaridad Publishing House.

SIONIL JOSE, Francesco, 2011, Hindsight, <http://www.philstar.com/arts-and-culture/725822/why-we-are-shallow>, uptade September 12, 2011.

ZIALCITA, Fernando N., 2005, *Authentic Though not Exotic. Essays on Filipino Identity*, Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press.

Abstract: How come that people, many of whom are applauded for their talents in the seven corners of this world, are deterred from succeeding in their home country? The purpose of this contribution is to explore aspects of the complex *problématique* of a culture of demotivation in a polity that fails to provide positive prospects. Subsequent despair drives ordinary workers overseas and bleeds the nation dry of talented achievers. In the following, religion, national becoming, way of life and intellectual climate will be spotlighted. These subjects tie in with my observations on the Filipino social imagination (Mulder 2014), and on the haunting question of Philippine national identity (Mulder 2015).

L'énigme philippine

Résumé: *Comment se fait-il que des personnes, dont nombreuses sont applaudies pour leurs talents aux sept coins de la planète, sont dissuadées de réussir dans leur pays d'origine ? Le but de cette contribution est d'explorer les aspects de la problématique complexe d'une culture de démotivation dans un régime qui ne parvient pas à fournir des perspectives positives. Le résultat est que le désespoir pousse les travailleurs ordinaires à partir à l'étranger et saigne la nation de ses talents. Dans ce qui suit, la religion, le devenir national, le mode de vie et le climat intellectuel aux Philippines seront mis en lumière. Ces sujets se rattachent à mes précédentes observations sur l'imaginaire social philippin (Mulder 2014) et sur la question lancinante de l'identité nationale des Philippines (Mulder 2015).*

Keywords: Great and little tradition of the Philippines, localized religion and modernity, loss of history (and identity), demoralization, anti-intellectualism.

Mots-clés: *Grande et petite tradition des Philippines, religion locale et modernité, perte d'histoire (et d'identité), démoralisation, anti-intellectualisme.*