



The Paradox of Multiculturalism: Ethnicity and Identity in the Philippines

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The ideal of a multicultural democratic society is often celebrated today without a clear understanding of the difficulties or problems its realization entails. For the articulation of plural cultures and democratic institutions can be envisaged as a practical project only within the complex and changing social formations that they inhabit. In the case of "third world" societies in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, colonialism introduced a politics of difference that multiplied boundaries within and without: the subjugated communities were polarized internally and against one another. Differences marked by race, class, gender, religion, nationality, and other ethnic particulars functioned as the instruments by which the hegemony of the colonial power was established and maintained. In effect, a policy of multiculturalism was devised and applied in order to disintegrate former cohesive groups, foster antagonisms between and among their members, and prevent any sense of national unity that would challenge colonial rule. With an apartheid regime of cultures that are plural but hierarchized, the antithesis of democracy--political and economic inequality--flourished. Racism reigned supreme. I subscribe to David Harvey's belief that "it is hard to discuss the politics of identity, multiculturalism, 'otherness,' and 'difference' in abstraction from material circumstances and of political project." We cannot do without concrete historical specification. Colonized for over 300 years by mercantile Spain, the inhabitants of the Philippine islands acquired a sense of national unity after 350 years of peasant revolts culminating in the revolution of 1896-98. That was forged by an alliance of classes and popular sectors which established the first Philippine Republic. This emerging nation-state was destroyed by the military and economic might of the United States in the Filipino-American War of 1899-1902. The Philippine Republic that was granted independence in 1946 reflected a half-century of successful multiculturalism instanced by the use of the English language as the medium of communication in business and government. The dominance of American commodified culture persists amid residual customs and archaic practices in various regions, with 20 major ethnolinguistic groups uttering their demands for recognition and for their share of the social goods.

Before illustrating how multiculturalism, the politics of difference, operates in the Philippines today, allow me to quote a capsule description of the country from an American geographer. The Philippines, writes George Demko, is characterized by enormous class divisions:

A few landowners have acquired massive wealth, while almost three quarters of the population of 65 million live in direst poverty, unable to satisfy basic needs. Mestizos make up 2 percent of the population but garner 55 percent of the personal income.[Demko then describes the dependence of thousands of Filipinos on the U.S. military bases, part of the U.S. Pacific Defense system, dismantled in 1992.] Communist guerillas--the New People's Army--are spirited. Muslims have

fought a secessionist war in Mindanao. Most of the people are Malay in origin, but there are more than 75 ethnolinguistic groups. All but 5 percent of the population live on the 11 largest islands. Some people like the Tasadays live so remotely, they have only recently been discovered, and disturbed, by the outside world. About 75 indigenous tongues, including eight major ones, are spoken. The official one is Tagalog (1992, 295-296).

Aside from some factual errors, this geographer has drastically selected the classic markers of underdevelopment. What is striking here is the configuration of a social formation disintegrated by class, language, ideology, religion, and colonial depredations. The Philippines seems vibrant with differences--at the price of the suffering of the majority of citizens.

In most anthropological accounts, the two main unifying features of the Philippine formation are the racial type (Mongoloid) and the Austronesian or Malayo-Polynesian language family. In general, the majority is supposed to share the "lowland peasant culture," a Malay culture characterized by settlement patterns determined by geography and by the two major religions, Christianity and Islam. Such differences are said to come "from the specific ways ethnolinguistic groups adapted to their particular environment over long periods of time, the varying impact of outside influences, and the degree of their involvement in national affairs" (Roxas-Lim 1996, 617). In the sixties, an American political scientist commented that despite the efforts of the government's "Commission on National Integration," "for all practical purposes, the non-christians are excluded from the designation 'Filipino'" (Grossholtz 1964, 53).

In this static tabulation of determining factors that supposedly explain cultural pluralism, the classic stress on objective conditions (settlement and subsistence patterns) is supplemented with the standard reference to kinship, sociopolitical institutions, and religion or belief systems. The status quo becomes reified when this ethnographic scheme erases the historical process contoured and complicated by group antagonisms: "Sociopolitical institutions were focused on kin and village groups until the establishment of the central government. However, contemporary national institutions are weak and splintered; thus greater reliance is placed on mutual support groups through extended kinship ties which are fundamental and are rarely, if ever, transcended even within the framework of governmental and national organizations (618). Why kinship becomes paramount in this setup is really never explained except as a consequence of weak governmental and national institutions, which in turn requires explanation. One concludes that in contrast to industrialized urban societies today, a dependent peripheral formation like the Philippines manifests an extremely uneven, disintegrated surface where heterogeneous, shifting identities and affiliations thrive amid economic and political vortices of strife. Multiculturalism indeed abounds in an unstable, unequal, class-torn society.

One of the theoreticians of the concept of a multicultural society, John Rex (1997), posits a neoWeberian paradigm centered on the split between public and private domains. This split is analogous to the distinction made by German sociologist Ferdinand Tonnies between *Gemeinschaft* (primary groups revolving around the family, kinship, ethical relations) and *Gesellschaft* (impersonal bureaucratic and judicial processes in cities). My reservation about this paradigm concerns its occlusion of unequal power/property relations, of which more later.

Rex believes that the ideal of multiculturalism is consonant with equality of opportunity, a basic democratic principle, when a society is unified in the public domain (law, politics, economics) but at the same time encourages diversity in private or communal matters (domestic life, religion, morality). Obviously this requires the separation of church and state, and the nearly total secularization of a citizen's life. When, on the other hand, a society is unitary in the public realm and also enforces unity of cultural practices in the private realm, then we have an assimilationist polity like France but not Germany or Japan. Another setup alluded to by Rex, which strikes me as quite problematic, is the U.S. Deep South before the reforms of the Civil Rights era: differential rights in the public sphere presumably coexist with homogeneous cultural practices shared by whites and blacks alike--"separate but equal." Finally, the opposite of the ideal multicultural society--almost a parody or ironic mirror-image, is the South African apartheid system where differential rights of groups prevail in the public domain together with the law-governed disparate cultural practices of incommensurable nationalities. The *bantustan* phenomenon is the index of such segregation in both public and private domains.

In my view, Rex's argument hinges on the premise that the public domain defined by the formal equality of individuals (as proclaimed in a republican constitution and Bill of Rights) can coexist with an unconstrained diversity of private/communal groups with their ethnic particularities (morality, religion, kinship network of diasporic cohorts tied to various homelands). But surely Western juridical regulations infringe on and delimit certain practices of marital arrangements and codes/mores of sexuality in ethnic communities. In the United States, for example, cases of Kampuchean ritual sacrifice of animals in church have been brought to court, and the mass media have condemned the beating of children by immigrant parents with more authoritarian upbringing. Despite such incompatibilities in milieus regulated by the welfare-state, Rex insists that dialogue and tensions in the multicultural society are an integral part of the civic culture. I believe that such dialogue and the ostensible equilibrium of everyday life hides the sharp internal contradictions in the multicultural society in which the public domain legitimizes the way one group exercises hegemony--in both coercive and consensual senses--over others. In this hegemony, the control of land and labor-power, its production and reproduction, is key. When we examine the existing conflicts in the Philippines between the Muslims (about six million in Mindanao and Sulu) and the central government, we find Rex's conceptual dualism inadequate. The sheer asymmetry of status and wealth in public life between Muslims and the Filipino elite renders the static distinction between individual and collective untenable.

The Muslim situation may be taken as exemplary of the problematic nature of the plural society as historically constituted in the Philippines. While the antagonism between Muslims and Christians dates back to Spanish colonization from 1565 to 1898, and U.S. colonial domination from 1898 to 1946, the present conflict is not religious but fundamentally economic and political. The Spaniards tried to establish theocratic rule over the islands but failed to subdue the Muslims, Igorots, and other aboriginal communities. They believed that the infidels can only be pacified by conquest and conversion.

In contrast, the United States, based not on a tributary but capitalist mode of production, applied a dual policy of violence and diplomacy. Shaped by the experience of racialized wars against the American Indians and Mexicans, U.S. public opinion considered the Muslims as savages to be

disciplined, even though the Bates Treaty of 1899 recognized the Sultan of Sulu as a "protected sovereignty." The Moros of Lanao and other areas mounted fierce resistance to U.S. invasion (witness the Bud Dajo massacre of 1906 where more than 600 men, women, and children were slain by the U.S. military).

In June 1907, the U.S. devised the Organic Act for the Moro provinces which provided for a measure of local autonomy except in the area of customs and forest revenues. Such autonomy, however, did not mean the toleration of practices such as slavery (the American anthropologist Dean Worcester wrote a sustained invective against non-Christian cultures in his report of 1913 entitled *Slavery and Peonage in the Philippine Islands*). Religious practices remained untouched, but ethics and family life could not but be affected by universal mass education geared toward individualist competition in entrepreneurial careers and government service. Reflecting on the accomplishments of U.S. "compadre colonialism," Governor General W. Cameron Forbes praised the American forcible imposition of a legal system that dismantled the linkage between public and private in tributary systems: "Left to themselves, the Moros would unquestionably have maintained a system purely feudal in its essence" (1945, 280).

There is no doubt that the U.S. policy of integration through education, jurisprudence, and contractual business led to the gradual erosion of the datu monopoly on power. But it was the government-sponsored migration of Christian settlers--accelerated by President Ramon Magsaysay's resettlement of the Huks in the fifties--that exacerbated the land disputes that raged during the entire period of U.S. ascendancy. The full-scale war between the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Marcos dictatorship in the seventies demonstrated the failure of a liberal-capitalist policy of tolerance via differential incorporation based on ascribed "primordial" lifeways. While Muslim religious rituals and familial customs were allowed, denial of economic opportunities to the majority continued precisely because the patronage system preserved the datu patriarchal regime while the neocolonial oligarchic rule upheld predominantly Christian priorities framed within the Cold War strategy of the Western imperial powers. With the historically oriented MNLF, the category of the Bangsa Moro nationality rather than class or race became the salient marker of contradiction between itself and the Manila-based government. The MNLF leader Nur Misuari, who eventually accepted political accommodation if not subordination to the comprador/neocolonial oligarchy, at first espoused a militant separatist nationalism. His radical roots in left-wing student activism blended with a sense of an indigenous Moro identity that fused public and private, the personal and the collective. While the MNLF originally derived inspiration from a historical materialist philosophy based on class struggle, the group that splintered from it, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) evinces more orthodox leanings; its supporters are the mainstream World Islamic League and the World Islamic Conference (Noble 1987, 198). A recent Islamic fundamentalist group, the Abbu Sayyaf, is mounting a more formidable challenge to the apparatuses of symbolic and physical violence wielded by the Estrada administration (Frake 1998).

With the pressure from the Islamic Conference of foreign ministers and Libya, the MNLF was finally persuaded to accept a limited form of regional autonomy in September 1996. This agreement seriously compromised its original demand of independence for the Moro nation, a demand now taken up by the MILF. Misuari's Southern Philippines Council for Peace and Development has been transformed again into a battleground between forces defined by ethnic, class, and national allegiances. Multiculturalism's civic ethos of mobile subject-positions flourishes in this part of the

Philippines.

I turn now to the situation of the indigenous peoples, a heterogeneous category impossible to reduce to the textbook stereotype of "cultural minority," to use the bureaucratic rubric.

The Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia accessed by millions propagate the textbook cliché of Christianized Malays as comprising the bulk of the population (approximately 75 million today), with mestizos (mixed Filipinos and white or Chinese descent) forming a small but economically and politically significant minority. I might interject here that the elevation of Corazon Cojuangco Aquino to the presidency (1986-92) foregrounded the immense leap in status and prestige of Filipinos of Chinese descent since the colonial days when they were treated as pariahs and outcasts (Corpuz 1965).

Obscured in the conventional description of the Filipino nationality are the indigenous or tribal Filipinos I referred to at the outset. They number more than 4 million, with over 40 ethnolinguistic groups, inhabiting mineral-rich lands all over the archipelago. While some are usually classified as uplanders engaged in slash-and-burn cultivation, the tribal communities are as variegated as the lowlander Christians whose form of life has been the model for Filipino national identity. Objects of exoticizing spectacle and prophylactic official investigation from the time they were displayed in the St. Louis Exposition of 1904, these aboriginal peoples have been severely victimized by government agencies, among them the notorious Presidential Assistance on National Minorities (PANAMIN) whose administrator Manuel Elizalde invented the Tasaday hoax (for an example of reifying propaganda, see Reyes 1980). In the last fifteen years, the term "Lumad" (meaning "grown from the place," autochthonous) has emerged to characterize the 18 ethnic groups native to Mindanao who have begun an organized campaign to oppose the capture and control of their resources by the expansive comprador state in the service of transnational corporations (Duhaylungsod and Hyndman 1993).

As with the Moros, the indigenous groups like the Igorots, Tingguians, Dumagats, T'Bolis and others have been differentially incorporated in the colonial polity under foreign rule, and subsequently in the neocolonial republic. The historian William Henry Scott (1993) has pointed out that the Igorots became a "cultural minority" on account of 350-years of resistance against foreign aggression. Having resisted assimilation and preserved their ethnic distinctiveness, they were forced during the Marcos period to submit to a nation-building agenda couched in the fascist slogan: "Isang lahi, isang bansa, isang tadhana--One race, one nation, one destiny" (Scott 1982, 28). Their armed guerilla resistance, committed to preserving their cultural integrity and insuring the survival of the community, continues to this day.

U.S. colonial rule established the Bureau of Non-Christian Tribes in 1901 to integrate ethnic minorities into the polity (Chaffee 1969). In general, a tacit policy of assimilation through education and law to promote business has defined the subaltern role of the indigenous peoples throughout this century. Decisive in this process is the institution of the market (chiefly of labor and natural resources) which originated from U.S. colonial law. The colonial administration "granted private land titles to large owners, placed all undeclared land under state ownership, opened such land to exploration, occupation and purchase by citizens of the United States and the Philippines"

(Swenson 1987, 200). Indigenous groups were excluded from public parks, forest reserves, and other lands sold by the Philippine government to settlers, foreign investors, and crony capitalists. More flagrantly during the Marcos regime with its export-oriented development program, the tribal lands were opened to mining and logging concessions, development projects like the World Bank-funded Chico River Basin Dam, as well as the plantation agriculture of foreign corporations attracted by tax incentives and the absence of environmental protection laws (Anti-Slavery Society 1983; Komite 1981).

We should also add here the corollary attempt to enforce "primitivism" on the reservations where indigenous communities have been assigned. Such commodifying strategies of exploiting the glamor of multiculturalism for tourist/media consumption definitely intrude into the private, communal domain. They undermined the peoples' right to survival and promotion of their cultural integrity. Given their role as suppliers of cheap labor and of bodies destined for resettlement (a deliberate colonial/neocolonial policy to alienate the tribal lands), the struggles of this "fourth world" coincide with those of the masses of oppressed peasants, workers, women, youth, and middle strata, as well as 7 million Overseas Contract Workers abroad, for social justice and popular democracy. In the fifties, social scientists located the problem of the "cultural minorities" as one of acculturation, a euphemism for assimilation or absorption into the majority culture. Of all the ethnic groups, the Chinese were held to have successfully acculturated to the point where they are losing their identity. Most academic experts criticized the Muslims, Igorots, and other indigenes as groups lacking sophistication in the manipulation of the legal-commercial culture, unlike the Chinese. Most Filipinos were then urged to learn the rules of liberal democracy, stop criticizing the presence of U.S. airbases, and persevere in the general "loyalty to Marilyn Monroe" (Espiritu and Hunt 1964, 11). In essence, according to these experts, the problem inhered in the difference between a barter economy practised by the indigenous groups and the monetary culture of the larger, "civilized" society. Clearly, the paradigm of modernization and developmentalism predicated on the superiority of Western political and economic institutions determined then, and continues to influence, the instrumentalizing technologies and policy implications offered by those who claim to be authorities on the cultural diversity of the Philippines.

Such fractious ethnic diversity has led to the notion of a self-destructive Filipino nation that Stanley Karnow has propagated in his notorious apology for U.S. imperialism, *In Our Image*. Meanwhile, the historian David Steinberg has taught the American public that the Philippines is "a plural society" not so much because of colonial divide-and-rule tactics, or policies of resettlement and marginalization, but because of the "reality of the centrifugal, noncohesive facts of life" (1982, 18). In fact, Steinberg adds, the pluralism of the Filipino oligarchy overshadows the class-based disparities in the general population.

In the midst of the centennial of the Philippine revolution against Spain, we need to pose the question whether the unity of the Filipino nation originally postulated by the revolutionary Malolos Congress of 1898 has been achieved on the bodies of Muslims, Igorots, Chinese, and other ethnic communities. The legacy of Jose Rizal, the Filipino national hero, to the Asian renaissance (according to the Indonesian scholar Adriana Elisabeth) is "cultural rebirth and empowerment" (1998, 5). Whatever its European derivation, nationhood, though racially/ethnically diverse, was then conceived by the *ilustrado* nationalists as an organic unity with one soul (*kaluluwa*), one mind (*isip*), and one heart (*puso*) founded on the security of the nation (*bansa*) (Bauzon 1991). In the

postindependence days, the Filipino nation was analyzed in terms of theoretical models like the minority/majority and rural/urban dichotomy, Tonnies' *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, and, most frequently, as a society governed by the patron-client linkage, reciprocity, dyadic network, etc. U.S. experts have often deployed a structural-functionalist methodology that cloaks the ideological dicta of the dominant classes with scientific value-free aura, evident in statements like: The Philippines is "a conservative, capitalist society in which the value of private property is cherished and the importance of wealth is stressed" (Steinberg 1986, 34). This functionalist approach has served invariably to legitimize the social-economic stratification of the status quo, with cultural difference utilized to explain (more precisely, rationalize) the unequal distribution of resources and the unjust power relations. Despite antithetical trends, sociologists concur in ascribing to Filipinos the tendency to "stress tradition, authority, the importance of the group rather than the individual, shame rather than guilt, the particularistic rather than the universal, and the acceptance of fate rather than the demand to remake the world" (Hunt 58).

What is missing in the conventional doctrine of functionalist and empiricist scholars is the historical context of social life. We miss the dynamics of conflict and its contingencies. There is no appreciation of the grounding in lived and remembered experience of various cultural styles or ethos, of the life-forms and ensemble of practices in which the agency of the interacting collectives becomes paramount. Cultures cannot be isolated from the shaping of history and the conflicts of social classes and groups. When social inquiry privileges the axiom of liberal individualism and ignores the problem of hegemony--in Gramsci's sense, domination inflected with the intellectual-moral leadership of a historic social bloc--then multiculturalism degenerates into romantic hypostatization of cultures as flower gardens frozen in time. Postmodern relativism and neopragmatism may have fostered the version of multiculturalism that denies coevalness of diverse cultures and reinforces the temporal distancing found in all the strategies of Eurocentric "civilizing missions" (Fabian 1983). This may explain the recurrent resort to the fetishizing of national character. And the allochronic taxonomy of traits that accompanies it in the disciplinary research into non-Western societies can only be read, in this perspective, as a symptom of the profound alienation which afflicts the observer/expert in a commodity-dominated world.

On the question of hegemony, we need to be reminded of the lesson of World War II and the attempt to impose the "Oriental traditions of humanity and morals" by bayonet. In 1942, the Marquis Yorisada Tokugawa, adviser to the Japanese Military Administration in the Philippines, came to Manila to launch a "cultural campaign" to replace Anglo-American materialism and individualism with a "Co-Prosperity Sphere ... founded on cultural ties and affinities" (Gosiengfiao 1983, 238). The attempt ended in carnage, the destruction of cities and entire communities, and incommensurable suffering for millions.

In a famous exchange of views on multiculturalism, Charles Taylor, Jurgen Habermas and others rehearsed the pros and cons of the politics of recognition of group identities vis-à-vis the primacy of individual autonomy that informs the "common culture" of most Western nation-states. The editor of this volume of exchanges concluded that in spite of differences, the views all converged on the belief that "some form of constitutional democracy may offer such a politics, based not on class, race, ethnicity, gender, or nationality, but rather on a democratic citizenship of equal liberties, opportunities, and responsibilities for individuals" (Gutmann 1994, xi-xii). What is deeply problematic here, to my mind, is not the polarity of public and private domains posited by Rex

mentioned earlier; rather, it is the use of the individual citizen as optic or measure of value, the valorization of the individual detached from the web of social relations that enable any subject to exercise transformative agency. It is here that we should heed this warning concerning the danger of Establishment multiculturalism: "Multiculturalism is based on a construction of community through a celebration and fossilization of differences" (Castles et al 1996, 365). With the intensifying commodification of ethnic particularisms, the multicultural spectacle now operates as the authentic "cultural logic of multinational or global capitalism" (Zizek 1997, 44).

When we talk of the ideal of multiculturalism in enabling social change, the question of leadership, of hegemony as a directive force uniting individuals as groups or collectivities, cannot be shirked, particularly if we assume that civil society in liberal democracies is the site where the power of capital is articulated with conscious effectivity, where cultural action or the production of meanings and affects takes place. In this context, the government or state can act as the organizer of consensus and also serve as the site where ideological struggle transpires. Bourgeois hegemony in civil society (that is, the ideological subordination of the masses to the bourgeoisie instead of simple coercive domination) enables the propertied class to control the state; "it is the cultural ascendancy of the ruling class that essentially ensures the stability of the capitalist order" (Anderson 1976/77, 26). And such cultural/ideological supremacy mediated by various compromises may be deemed equivalent to the consent of the ruled. Only when we factor in this historic process of the struggle for hegemony (and, by extension, for state power) among groups can we really begin a substantive discussion on the cognitive and pedagogical value of multiculturalism for "third world" societies where, in most cases, the violence of the neocolonial state often supervenes over a polymorphous civil society characterized by ceaseless antagonisms across class, gender, nationality, religion, locality, kinship, and so on. Only then does culture acquire its proper valence and efficacy in the complex plots of historical transformation.

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See also:

- [Introduction to Rizal: Toward a Re-Interpretation](#) (by E. San Juan, Jr.)