

*Clash of Spirits: The History of Power and Sugar
Planter Hegemony on a Visayan Island*
Filomeno V. Aguilar, Jr.
Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1998

Raul Pertierra

This first book of Dr. Filomeno Aguilar is an interesting and highly original study of Negros, with implications for the rest of the Philippines. He combines the rigour and painstaking approach of the historian, with the observations and cultural insights of the sociologist. Drawing on earlier studies of Negros' plantation economy and the extraordinary role of its elite, Aguilar suggests new ways of understanding Negrense society. Some of his insights had been suggested in earlier articles but this book develops them more convincingly.

Previous studies of Negros, and one might add most of the Philippines with the exception of anthropological approaches, depend primarily on political history or political economy. Aguilar does not neglect these perspectives but supplements them with an acute understanding of culture. One could describe this book as a cultural history of Negros' sugar economy.

At the core of Aguilar's study is the thesis that Negros and the rest of the Philippines have to be understood in terms of its rich body of folk beliefs. Interestingly, and contrary to most developmental and modernist approaches, these beliefs also apply to the

western-educated native elite, whose members exemplify the values of success. Negrenses, like other Filipinos, combine orthodox Catholic ideas with notions of spiritual agency. These spirit-agents confer power to people with appropriate knowledge and courage. Extraordinary success is often a sign of spiritual agency. Stories abound of people who have been able to harness these powers in exchange for their souls or at the cost of physically embodying their spirit-hosts. While these beliefs have been widely reported, Aguilar uses them innovatively to explain everyday practices such as gambling and its association with prowess.

Another interesting feature of Aguilar's work is his discussion of the changes in the relationship between plantation labour and hacenderos. During the 19th century, workers were scarce and hacenderos had to offer them relatively good terms. The Spanish colonial state, although generally ineffective, attempted to maintain a balance between hacenderos' demands and the rights of workers. This point is a welcome change to the routine portrayal, in Filipino scholarship, of everything Spanish as evil and exploitative.

By the 20th century, conditions had changed significantly. Not only was there a big increase of workers but, as importantly, hacenderos had obtained an effective monopoly of modern firearms. In addition, the administration of the state's resources, including surveillance, enhanced hacendero power. Combined with the increasing demands of a capitalist economy and backed by an effective American colonial government whose local officials were either hacenderos or their supporters, the conditions for plantation workers declined greatly.

Aguilar's study complements the work of Alfred McCoy, an earlier authority on Negros, whose original research emphasizes elite strivings for power and wealth. Aguilar's work locates these individual struggles in their cultural and social contexts. Both scholars reveal how the Negrense elite manipulated local and national politics to achieve their wealth. Their astute but unfair use of state institutions such as the Philippine National Bank ensured elite wealth but also set the conditions for the region's progressive pauperization. Marcos' accumulative practices reproduced these earlier methods on a grander scale but for many Filipinos, his success indicates supernatural and magical efficacy rather than political corruption.

In a basically animist ideology which motivates much of Filipino folk belief,

material success is often seen as the consequence of supernatural favour. Rich Christians, including their respective Churches, in the eyes of many ordinary people, are not exempted from this association. Even if theoretically invalid, in practice these beliefs are often validated.

I indicated that Aguilar's work, while primarily about Negros, has implications for other regions in the Philippines. In Ilocos, there is also a rich body of beliefs regarding supernatural entities cohabiting this world. Their regular propitiation (*atang*) is necessary to ensure good harvests as well as ancestral blessings. While the support of these supernatural beings is eagerly sought, there are corresponding risks. Moreover, these beings are essentially unpredictable and any attempt to control them is dangerous. In Ilocos, as in Negros, there is a close association between men of prowess (*malalaki*) and heavy gambling. Both imply risk-taking as a form of masculine courage.

This book opens new possibilities for Philippine scholarship. Specialists in other areas will also benefit from it. It provides a good empirical basis for a cultural and hermeneutic approach. I hope that Filipino researchers particularly will develop its insights to enrich their studies and replace hitherto limited perspectives with a broader understanding of culture and society.