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Cacique Democracy in the Philippines: Origins and Dreams

About this time last year, President Corazon Aquino told a most instructive lie. Addressing the Filipino-Chinese Federated Chambers of Commerce on 9 March 1987, she described her appearance before them as a 'home-coming,' since her great-grandfather had been a poor immigrant from south-east China's Fukien province.[1] Doubtless her desperate need—given the Philippines' near-bankrupt economy and $28 billion external debt[2]—to inspire feelings of solidarity and confidence among a powerful segment of Manila's business class made some embroidery understandable. But the truth is that the President, born Corazon Cojuangco, is a member of one of the wealthiest and most powerful dynasties within the Filipino oligarchy. Her grandfather, putative son of the penniless immigrant, was Don Melecio Cojuangco, born in Malolos, Central Luzon in 1871. A graduate of the Dominicans' Colegio de San Juan de Letran and the Escuela Normal, and a prominent *agricultor* (i.e. hacendado) in the province of Tarlac, he was, in 1907, at the age of 36, elected to the Philippine Assembly, the quasi-legislature established by the

American imperialists in that year.[3] One of his sons (Corazon's uncle) became Governor of Tarlac in 1941, another (her father, Don José) its most prominent Congressman. In 1967, one of his grandsons (her cousin), Eduardo 'Danding' Cojuangco, became Governor of Tarlac with Ferdinand Marcos's backing, and went on to count among the most notorious of the Marcos cronies. Another grandson (her younger brother), José 'Peping' Cojuangco, was in those days one of Tarlac's Congressmen, and is today again a Congressman—and one of the half-dozen most powerful politicians in the country. Her marriage to Benigno Aquino, Jr., at various periods Governor of Tarlac and Senator, linked her to another key dynasty of Central Luzon. Benigno Aquino, Sr., had been a Senator in the late American era and won lasting notoriety for his active collaboration with the Japanese Occupation regime. At the present time, one of her brothers-in-law, Agapito 'Butz' Aquino, is a Senator, and another, Paul, the head of Lakas ng Bansa (one of the three main 'parties' in her electoral coalition); an uncle-in-law, Herminio Aquino, is a Congressman, as are Emigdio 'Ding' Tanjuatco (cousin), and Teresita Aquino-Oreta (sister-in-law).[4] A maternal uncle, Francisco 'Komong' Sumulong, is majority floor-leader of the House of Representatives. Nor was Corazon herself, on becoming President, quite the simple housewife of her election broadsheets. For thirteen years she had served as treasurer of the Cojuangco family holding company, which controls a vast financial, agricultural, and urban real estate empire.[5]

Yet there is a core of truth in President Aquino's claims of 9 March 1987 and this core offers a useful guide to understanding the peculiarities of modern Philippine politics. The '-co' suffix to her maiden name is shared by a significant number of other dynasties within the national oligarchy: Cuenco, Tanjuatco, Tiangco, Chioco, etc. It originates from the Hokkienese *k'o*, a term of respect for older males; and it shows that her family originated among the Chinese mestizos who bloomed economically under the Spanish colonial regime and consolidated their wealth with political power under the Americans.[6] It is the dominance of this group which decisively marks off the Philippines from Spanish America (mestizos frequently in power, but not Chinese mestizos) and the rest of Southeast Asia (Chinese mestizos, indeed any mestizos, removed from political power, with the ambiguous exception of Siam). How did this happen?

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[1] *Philippine Star Week*, 8–14 March 1987.

[2] In July 1987 she estimated that debt payments would consume 40 per cent of government revenues, and 27 per cent of all export earnings for the following six years. The economic growth rate in 1986 was 0.13 per cent. *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 28 July 1987.

[3] *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 12 February 1987; and information kindly supplied by Philippine historian Michael Cullinane. He ran as a candidate of the Progresistas, the most openly American-collaborationist of the parties of that era. The above article implausibly suggests that Melecio's grandfather, a certain 'Martin' Cojuangco, was the real immigrant founder of the dynasty.

[4] Emigdio is secretary-general of the Lakas ng Bansa. José 'Peping' Cojuangco is chairman of another main coalition component, the PDP-Laban.

[5] *Time*, 5 January 1987.

[6] On this stratum the *locus classicus* remains Edgar Wickberg, *The Chinese in Philippine Life, 1850–1898*, New Haven 1965.

Spanish Colonialism, the Church and the Mestizo Elite

By the time the Spanish arrived to conquer, in the 1560s, the empire of Felipe II had reached its peak, and the islands, named after him, were the last major imperial acquisition. Iberian energies were absorbed in Europe and the Americas. The few Spaniards who did travel on to the Philippines found little on the spot to satiate their avarice. The one substantial source of rapid wealth lay not in mines but in commerce with Imperial China. Manila quickly became the entrepôt for the 'galleon trade', by which Chinese silks and porcelains were exchanged for Mexican silver, to be resold, at colossal profit, across the Pacific and eventually in Europe. It was not a business that required much acumen or industry; one needed merely to be in Manila, to have the right political connections, and to work out relationships with the Chinese traders and artisans who flocked to the entrepôt.[7]

The absence of mines, and, until much later, of hacienda-based commercial agriculture, meant not only a concentration of the Spanish in the Manila area, but the lack of any sustained interest in massive exploitation of the indigenous (or imported) populations as a labour force. At the same time, the fact that the pre-Hispanic Philippines (in contrast to Burma, Siam, Cambodia, Vietnam or Java) lacked any states with substantial military or bureaucratic power meant that relatively little force was required for the initial conquest and for its subsequent consolidation. Small garrisons, scattered here and there, generally sufficed.[8] Hence, *in the provinces*, to a degree unparalleled anywhere in the Americas except Paraguay, Spanish power in the Philippines was mediated through the Church.

The ardently Counter-Reformation clerics were fortunate in finding the great bulk of the indigenous population to be 'animists'. Buddhism and Hinduism had not reached so far. And though Islam was sweeping in from what today is Indonesia, it had consolidated itself only in parts of Mindanao and adjacent southern islands. There it could be contained, if never subdued.[9] Meanwhile a vast proselytization was launched

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[7] On the galleon trade, see William L. Schurz, *The Manila Galleon*, reprint edition, New York 1959. Furthermore, responding to pressure from enlightened clerics and officials appalled by the savage extortions of the settlers in the Americas, Madrid attempted to make amends in the Philippines by (fitfully) barring the residence of private Spaniards in the provinces.

[8] There is a sizeable literature on the Spanish Philippines, but see especially, James L. Phelan, *The Hispanization of the Philippines: Spanish Aims and Filipino Responses, 1565–1700*, Madison 1959; Nicholas P. Cushner, *Spain in the Philippines: From Conquest to Revolution*, Quezon City 1971; Renato Constantino, *The Philippines: A Past Revisited*, Quezon City 1975, Parts 1 and 2; and the many impressive essays in Alfred W. McCoy and Ed. C. de Jesus, eds., *Philippine Social History: Global Trade and Local Transformations*, Quezon City 1982.

[9] Drawing on their experiences in the Iberian peninsula, the Spaniards termed these Southeast Asian Muslims 'Moors' ('*Moros*'). The name has, after four centuries, stuck. Those Muslims today seeking independence from the Philippines are loosely united in what they call the Moro National Liberation Front. The ghost of Felipe II must be amused.

The best historical-anthropological sources on the 'Moros' are: P.G. Gowing, *Muslim-Filipinos—Heritage and Horizon*, Quezon City 1979; Cesar Adib Majul, *Muslims in the Philippines*, Quezon City 1973, and his *The Contemporary Muslim Movement in the Philippines*, Berkeley 1985; and T.J.S. George, *Revolt in Mindanao: The Rise of Islam in Philippine Politics*, Oxford 1980. Important monographs on two of the major ethno-linguistic groups within the Moro People are Thomas Kiefer, *The Tausug: Violence and Law in a Philippine Muslim Society*, New York 1972; and Reynaldo Clemeña Ileto, *Magindanao, 1860–1888: the Career of Dato Uto of Buayan*, Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University, Southeast Asia Program Data Paper no. 32, 1971.

which has resulted in the contemporary Philippines being 90 per cent Christian.[10] (Only in twentieth-century Korea has Christianization in Asia been comparably successful.) The most noteworthy feature of this campaign was that it was conducted, most arduously, not through the medium of Spanish, but through the dozens of local languages. Till the very end of the Spanish regime no more than 5 per cent of the local population had any facility with the colonial language. Spanish never became a pervasive lingua franca, as it did in the Americas, with the result that, certainly in 1900, and to a lesser extent even today, the peasants and fishermen in different parts of the archipelago could not communicate with one another: only their rulers had a common archipelago-wide speech.

Two other features of clerical dominion had lasting consequences for the evolution of Philippine social structure. On the one hand, the quarrelling Orders, parcelled among out the various islands by Felipe II in the sixteenth century, pioneered commercial agriculture in the later eighteenth century, at the prodding of Carlos III's last, enlightened governor, José Basco y Vargas (1777–87). It was they who built what, in effect, were the first great haciendas. But these 'conglomerates' remained institutional, rather than family (dynastic) property. The friars might liberally father children on local women, but they could not marry the women, or bequeath property to the progeny. In due course, the conquering Americans would dispossess the friars of their lands, as the eighteenth-century Bourbons had dispossessed the Jesuits; and these lands would fall like ripe mangoes into the hands of the likes of President Aquino's immediate ancestors.[11] The Philippines thus never had a substantial *criollo* hacendado class.

On the other hand, the Church, at least in its early days, had serious dreams of Christianizing the Celestial Empire. From the start it set eagerly to converting those whom the Spanish generally referred to as *sangleys*.[12] Usually unlucky with the itinerant fathers, they were spectacularly successful with the children fathered on local mothers. Spanish colonial law helped by assigning these children a distinct juridical status as mestizos (in due course the word meant, typically, not the offspring of Spaniards and 'natives', but of Chinese and local women). Christianized through their mothers, organized in their own guilds (*gremios*), compelled to avoid political transvestitism by wearing a distinctive costume and coiffure, these children, and their in-marrying further descendants, came to form a distinct stratum of colonial society.

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[10] The standard work is Horacio de la Costa, *The Jesuits in the Philippines, 1581–1768*, Cambridge 1961. But see also Gerald H. Anderson, ed., *Studies in Philippine Church History*, Ithaca, N.Y. 1969; and the brilliantly iconoclastic text of Vicente L. Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule*, Ithaca, N.Y. 1988.

[11] In the provincial environs of Manila alone, the clerics had accumulated, by the end of the nineteenth century, over 500,000 acres of land. The basic text on these developments is Dennis Morrow Roth, *The Friar Estates of the Philippines*, Albuquerque 1977.

[12] From the Hokkienese *sengli*, meaning 'trader'. It is a lesson for our nationalistic age that neither the Spaniards nor the Hokkienese could yet imagine 'Chinese'. In this regard, they lagged far behind Amsterdam's United East India Company, the giant transnational of the seventeenth century, which devoted intense penal, juridical, and 'sumptuary' effort to forcing targeted groups under its power to realize that they were, after all, *Chinese.*

In some cases, perhaps only the '-co' suffix to their names betrayed distant celestial origins.

They might, however, have remained a marginal and stigmatized group, had it not been for the services of British imperialism. When Madrid joined in the Seven Years' War, London responded, *inter alia*, by occupying Manila in 1762 and holding it for the next two years. The local *sangleys*, frequent victims of Iberian extortion and contempt, rallied to the invaders, who, when they retired, insouciantly left these humble allies to the vengeful mercies of their erstwhile oppressors. Most were then expelled from the Philippines, and further immigration was legally barred for almost a century. Into the vacuum created by the expulsions came the mestizos, who took over much of local trade, and began, following the friars' example, to move into small-scale latifundism.[13]

But they were, world-historically, several generations behind their ladino confrères in the Americas. Among them there were still no great rural magnates, no lawyers, few priests or prominent exporting merchants; above all there was no intelligentsia. The Church, characteristically reactionary, controlled printing and what miserable travesty of educational institutions existed. Hence the great nationalist upheaval that rocked the Americas between 1810 and 1840 had no counterpart in the archipelago until the 1880s.

The nineteenth century, nonetheless, was kind to the mestizos. One might have expected Spaniards to flock there after the loss of the Americas. But the last galleon had sailed in 1811. Spain itself was racked with ceaseless conflict. And Cuba was so much closer, so infinitely richer. New people arrived, but the ones who mattered were not Spaniards but Anglo-Saxons (British and Americans) and, once again, *sangleys*, by now of course 'Chinese'. In 1834 Manila was fully opened to international trade, and Cebu City and other smaller ports followed in due course; the ban on Chinese immigration was abolished. Chinese discipline, austerity, and energy quickly drove the mestizos out of inter-island trade and small-scale urban business. On the other hand, the internationalization of the economy after 1834 offered the mestizos—now a quarter of a million strong in a four million population—new opportunities in the countryside, in combination with British and American trading houses. These businesses saw the possibilities in full-scale commercialization of Philippine agriculture, and thus provided the necessary capital and commercial outlets to permit the mestizos to become, for the first time, real hacendados.

Nothing better illustrates this interplay between Anglo-Saxons, mestizos and Chinese than the modern history of the island of Negros, today the 'sugar island' par excellence of the Philippines. Almost uninhabited when British interests set up the first sugar mill there in 1857, the island's population had increased almost tenfold by the end of the

[13] The account in this and the following paragraphs is summarized from Wickberg, *The Chinese in Philippine Life*.