



CARMEN GUERRERO NAKPIL

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The Land and the People





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1 The Land



DESPITE its long history and ancient culture, the Philippines is a young state which attained its independence only in 1946 with the end of the American regime. An act of U.S. Congress restored the independence that had been lost with the cession of the Philippines by Spain to the United States in the Treaty of Paris of December 1898 and lost once again at the end of the Filipino-American War (1899-1902).

At the turn of the twentieth century, on May 1, 1899, while the American and Spanish fleets confronted each other in a prearranged mock battle in Manila Bay, two other squadrons—the German Kaiser’s and His British Majesty’s warships—awaited the outcome for reasons of their own. Simultaneously, the Philippine revolutionary army which had already driven Spanish forces from most of the country and had laid siege to the capital was prevented from taking part in the surrender of Manila by the Americans, who had been posing as their allies. The day, the country and the next Philippine half-century went to the Americans.

Geographically, the Philippines is as complex as its history. An archipelago composed of 7,107 islands (at the last count) it is arranged delicately, like a filigreed bangle, on a limb of the Pacific Ocean between Japan and Indonesia. Only one thousand of the islands are populated and only 11 of them account for 95 percent of the country’s total land area.

The irregular shapes of the islands which are splayed over several hundred kilometers of sea give imagery and texture to the Filipino sensibility. The seas which surround them, the Pacific Ocean, the China, Sulu and Celebes Seas, define the Filipino inner and outer worlds and give Filipinos a sense of detachment. It is probably to this sense of space and isolation that they owe their other-worldliness.

The islands of Taiwan and Borneo lie directly north and south, thus neatly indicating the racial and political past and present of the Philippines. Presaging its future are China, Indochina, Malaysia and Singapore to the west and southwest and the Pacific Ocean (the "American lake" of the political scientists) with Hawaii and the U.S. West Coast to the east.

The Philippines lies north of the equator, although very slightly so, making the weather for at least three months of the year uncomfortably hot, humid and close. For three other months (from December to February) the climate is subtropical—mild and cool with refreshingly chilly evenings. In between there stretches a long, unpredictable monsoon, bringing typhoons, cyclones and torrential rains, which try the temper and the economy.

LAND and water are the bases of the Filipino experience. Miracles of peaks, mist and pinewood on the cordilleras; vast, green plains; dripping rain forests; waterfalls and rivers which swell or shrink according to the season; mountainsides forming stupendous natural amphitheaters to emerald gulfs and bays; lakes within lakes; savannahs and volcanoes of divine beauty, form the backdrop to Filipino life. Rapid soil erosion, where some of the forests have been cleared for quick profit, often leads to floods in the lowlands, but rich alluvial deposits in the large deltas make the land incredibly lush and fertile.

Luzon, the largest island (35 percent of the total land area), is sliced neatly down the center by majestic mountain ranges, the twin Cordilleras and the Sierra Madre. To one side lie the barren coastal plains of the Ilocos. On the other is the tobacco-thick Cagayan Valley and below, the great central plain, the so-called rice bowl, with the volcanic southeastern region, the Taal and Mayon Volcanoes bringing up the rear.

The Visayas, the central islands between Luzon and Mindanao, include several main islands of phantasmagoric trapezoidal shapes, like pieces of a giant jigsaw puzzle that have been disarranged by cosmic forces: triangular Panay with a central lowland shaped like a saucer, the rich province of Negros with its sugar plantations, the mountainous and arid, elongated island of Cebu, Samar and Leyte to the east, full of sensuous beauty—the first to be glimpsed by the great Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan.

Mindanao to the south, the second-largest island, is a world apart. It has a climate basically different from that of the rest of the country since it lies outside the so-called typhoon belt and is much nearer the equator. Because it has been the least exploited by the long line of colonizers, it is also culturally different. Its great forests, plains, valleys, plateaus and waterfalls provide hydroelectric power, an embarrassment of rich banana and abaca plantations, timber, gold, silver, copper, iron and manganese ore have earned for it the name of Promised Land. Like the Sulu Archipelago still further south and dagger-shaped Palawan Island on the far west, the richest and least inhabited, where oil has recently been discovered, several provinces of Mindanao are Muslim.

Nature's largess to the Philippine archipelago includes plants and animals that are a botanical and zoological wonder; 8,500 species of flowering plants, 1,000 different kinds of ferns alone, 800 species of orchids.

Fully one-fourth of the land is covered by wild grasses, while the hardwood forests of ironwood which went into the making of Spanish galleons and Philippine mahogany which makes some of the world's best furniture occupy almost half the land area. There are 500 species of birds, pheasants, parrots, quail, cuckoos and doves, 700 kinds of butterflies, snakes and lizards, of which there are 100 species, and, to the sorrow of foreign ecologists, several species recently endangered, the Philippine eagle and the wild buffalo, or *tamaraw*, some tiny squirrels and lemurs.

The splendid flora and fauna vie with each other for a place under the dazzling Philippine sun, which has an exceptional quality altogether, making everything seem brighter, sharper and more vivid. Perhaps that is why Filipino women dress extravagantly and why Philippine towns seem garish to foreign eyes and why its painters and photographers are magnificently successful. Everywhere nature outdistances art.

Some geologists believe that the Philippine archipelago is really the uppermost curve of the great Sunda Shelf, the underwater platform which holds up Borneo and the other large islands of Indonesia. At the end of the last Ice Age, from 16 million to 11 million years ago, the Philippines was marooned, so to speak, on the swirling waves of the China Sea when the waters began to rise.

THE PHILIPPINES has been marooned in many other senses.

Unlike the neighboring Malay countries, the islands were hardly touched by the great Hindu empire of Sri-Vijaya, which ruled from Sumatra between A.D. 700 and 1300. They also largely eluded the attentions of the powerful commercial empire of the Madjapahit in Java in the fourteenth century. Despite political isolation,

racial cultural and commercial ties flourished.

The Philippines has always shared with other countries of Southeast Asia a common linguistic root (Malayo-Polynesian), a homogeneity of racial type and a basic social organization: villages held together by kinship and governed by family elders and unwritten prehistoric customs that are often more binding than law.

The earliest inhabitants of the archipelago were small Negroid nomads—now almost extinct—and as unrelated to the country's racial mainstream as the Ainus of Japan or the Amerindians are to the modern populations of Japan and America.

Present-day Filipinos are descendants of Malays believed to have traveled from what is now South China through Sumatra and Borneo and Malaysia in succeeding waves of migration over a span of several centuries. These early Malays were excellent seafarers; they crossed uncharted seas in large boats called *balangay*, whose name the smallest Filipino political unit, the *barangay*, still carries to this day.

Still, the Philippine islands must always have seemed too distant from the Malay power centers and too fragmented to afford any worthwhile consolidation. Archipelagos are, in any case, hard to govern and harder to unify.

The Philippines negotiated both problems with partial success in the sixteenth century. To the native racial and cultural unity was added a political unity begun with the European discovery of the islands in 1521 by Magellan and later imposed by the *conquistador* Miguel Lopez de Legazpi in 1565, which inaugurated 333 years of Spanish rule. Common suffering under the repressive Spanish regime—which was not without some blessings: for example, early and relatively rapid westernization—united the Filipinos further. They first began to think of themselves as Filipinos belonging to one nation during

the agitation which led to the Philippine Revolution against Spain in 1896.

Today there are 45 million Filipinos, and they are increasing at a prodigious birthrate of 2.9 (the highest in Asia), which a new Population Control Commission is seeking to contain through modern methods.

The first, strongest and most ineluctable institution in the Philippines is the family. His family is the Filipino's religion, system of government, school, bank, hospital and social-security system. He goes to his relatives for material and moral support, for entertainment and heart balm. The family is his philosophy of life.

A sociological study says that every Filipino has 300 relatives, which explains everything, from a national proneness to nepotism to the profligacy of town fiestas. Several generations ago it was not uncommon for a couple to raise 12 or 15 children. Today, statistics say that the average number of children in every family is six—four more than the ideal pursued by the new Population Control Commission.

Like most developing countries, the Philippines has an extremely young population. A 16-year-old is classified in the "older half" of the population since 45 percent are 15 or below. On the other hand, only three percent are 65 years old or over. This means that almost one-half of the total number of Filipinos are nonworking dependents. The grimness of coping with the needs of 20 million children makes both the family system and formal government a treadmill.

Because the family dominates life, both government and the churches try to approximate the methods and techniques of paternal and filial ties. Priests, nuns, ministers and *imam* enjoy an avuncular position and exert a great deal of influence over their religious flocks. The Roman Catholic Church, inheritor of the wealth of the Spanish colonial church, is still one of the richest land-

owners and entrepreneurs (schools, banks, hotels, tourist agencies) in the Philippine Republic.

Political life at the grassroots is almost Sicilian in nature, with the all-powerful "godfather" as both seigneur and parent to hundreds and thousands of people in his barrio or town. In great part, the corrupt system of political patronage stems from this peculiar institution.

There is no lack of modern, depersonalized agencies, however. The school system—started by the Americans in 1901—engages the lives of more than 27 percent of the population. The regular process consists of a first enrollment at the age of seven, six years of free primary school (after which about 54 percent usually drop out for economic reasons), four years of fee-paying high school in public or private academies, four to eight years (as in the medical course) in college and two years of graduate school. Incidentally, there are more women students at the college, university and postgraduate level than men.

More than one-third of the national budget goes to education, but it is worth it, for the Philippines has a literacy rate of 85.7 percent (the highest in Asia with the exception of Japan) which rises sharply to 98 percent in Metro Manila. Recent reforms have made school curricula bilingual and job-oriented and so more responsive to the needs of economic development.

Philippine banks are probably the most modern institutions in the Philippine Republic. There are 1,762 banking offices (including commercial, rural, development, savings banks and their branches), 14 investment houses, 204 finance companies, 148 private insurance companies and uncounted pawnshops—most of which operate with a high degree of managerial expertise.

English-speaking, foreign-trained Filipino managers are prized all over Asia and command high salaries in the neighboring capitals. There are more than half a million registered business establishments, 68 percent as whole-

sale and retail outlets, 12 percent in manufacturing (from wooden handicrafts to electronic appliances), 9 percent in transport and 8 percent in services.

THE MOST controversial institution as far as foreign opinion is concerned is martial law or constitutional authoritarianism, as Filipinos prefer to call it, declared by President Ferdinand E. Marcos in September 1972.

As a political innovation, it can be understood only in Filipino terms. Despite the influence of the French Revolution on the intellectuals and revolutionaries of 1896, modern political ideas of democracy came to the present generation of Filipino "in American dress." Filipinos learned their civics from books about Jefferson, Franklin, Washington and Lincoln—all disciples of John Locke. Till Marcos, the Filipino understanding of democracy and freedom was completely American and so Anglo-Saxon. The constitutions of 1935 and 1972 were based on a bill of rights very much like that of the American constitution and provided for the same checks and balances, separation of powers and serious limitations to governmental authority which stood the American states and the British aristocracy—in their time—in good stead.

But the borrowed Filipino conviction that liberty can exist only when government authority is curbed, led to disastrous conditions under the independent Philippine Republic. Social anarchy, corruption and government impotence aggravated by active dissidence from the Right, the Left and the studentry, actually endangered the state.

The revolution worked by President Marcos is based on the theory that before authority can be limited it must exist. The vision of "liberty without the grace of human equality, freedom without the discipline of answerability," in the words of a Filipino scholar, had

to be substituted for a collective will under a strong and capable government which had to be above the hamstringing of Anglo-Saxon liberalism if it was to promote the common well-being.

Proof of the success of the Marcos democratic revolution is the economic upsurge which has led to rapid and important advances in the fields of trade, industry and finance. Until the Middle East oil producers' embargo blunted its ascent by doubling its oil bill, the Philippines had an economic growth rate of 10 percent while its dollar reserves rose to a peak of \$1.2 billion in 1974. Stock-market transactions continue to be vigorous and the credit rating at the IMF and the World Bank is so high that the Philippines now has a surfeit of creditor banks waiting to finance its many urban, agricultural and social-improvement projects. Through careful management the Marcos fiscal experts have succeeded in bringing down inflation from more than 40 percent in 1974 to below 10 percent in 1978.

LAND REFORM which, in other parts of the world has led to ironic situations of underproduction and social dislocation, went on slowly but surely. In just a couple of years, it conferred ownership or leaseholds on one million farmers, led to a self-sufficiency in rice and an enormously impressive rise in both traditional and new exports to old and new trading partners. A brisk climate of business enterprise seems to have moved into the vacuum left by the end of partisan politics.

In the Philippines more than half of the land is cultivated and planted to food and export crops, with rice, sugar, coconuts, abaca, tobacco at the top of the list. Fruit production also grew by more than 200 percent in the last ten years, and bananas, the oldest edible crop, are the top dollar earner (\$28 million a year). Tobacco

production also jumped 113 percent in a little over a decade and, as compensation for the higher cost of crude oil, there was an upswing in the demand for natural fibers. Manila hemp, or abaca, is now exported not only as the famous Manila rope but as components in tea-bag filters, mimeograph stencil tissues, checks and bank notes, meat casing and paper.

Manufacturing makes up the bulk of industrial output, with chemicals, wood, cane and cork, electrical appliances and transport equipment leading all the rest. Copper ore (the world's seventh-largest output), cement, gold and nickel also bring a great deal of foreign exchange to the country's coffers.

Forests cover about one-half of Philippine land area, three-fourths of them being of Philippine mahogany; the rest provide other valuable construction materials (at home and abroad: pine, mangrove which is found at the mouths of the numerous streams and bays, rattan and bamboo). Logging and plywood processing alone provide livelihood to half a million Filipinos.

Fishing—which together with rice provides the main staple of the Filipino diet—is the year-round vocation, hobby, occupation and principal means of livelihood of the majority of Filipinos. There are over 2,000 fish species and while coastal and inshore waters are assiduously worked, the vast open seas around the islands are still relatively untapped. The Sulu Sea alone provides 48 percent of the fish caught in the Philippines, but in Luzon freshwater production of delicious milkfish, prawns and other table delicacies are cultivated by the hectare.

IT IS in international relations that the success of the New Society stands fully revealed. Over a period that began ten years ago and accelerated very rapidly in the last four, foreign policy changed dramatically from an

almost neurotic, compulsive absorption with the United States to a mature open-minded, hard-nosed pragmatism. Diplomatic relations were opened with several countries whose existence the Philippine Republic did not even acknowledge for two decades, in deference to American participation in the long Cold War.

The Marcos Administration opened formal diplomatic relations and signed treaties of friendship, trade and cultural exchange with China (and thereby accomplished the difficult step of severance with Taiwan, hundreds of thousands of whose citizens live in the Philippines) in 1975, with the Eastern European countries of Bulgaria, Romania, Czechoslovakia, Poland and East Germany a little earlier and with the Soviet Union in June 1976. Clinically, dispassionately executed with an eye to national interest, these diplomatic coups are the best points of the Marcos Administration.

The Philippine "opening of the left" was accompanied by determined and singularly successful efforts to identify the country with the Third World and to achieve full, active membership in its arrangements, problems and forums. The Group of 77 conference held in Manila in 1976, and the Manila Declaration which resulted from it, and several Afro-Asian seminars among writers, technocrats, agriculturists and art experts are some of many small but significant triumphs. Rapport with the Muslim countries of the Middle East, with Egypt, Algiers, Saudi Arabia and Iran, is also a unique departure from a previous narrowness of vision and gave the Philippines the longed-for status that its large Muslim population deserved. To all Filipinos, it opened a whole new world of cultural, political and economic experience.

President Marcos' most biased opponents find it hard to conceive of a time when Philippine foreign policy was as intelligent, as self-reliant and as beneficial to the country's security, economy and prestige as it is today.
