SECOND EDITION, REVISED AND UPDATED

THE PHILIPPINES

A Singular and a Plural Place

David Joel Steinberg

Westview Profiles / Nations of Contemporary Asia

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Cover photos: (top) Opposition candidate Corazon Aquino and running mate Salvador Laurel at a Manila rally; (bottom) a Catholic nun talks with marines near rebel-controlled camps, Manila. (Photos courtesy of Tom Gralish and *The Philadelphia Inquirer*)

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To Joan,
who lights up
my life

Preface to the Second Edition

The Philippines is a singular and plural noun. The name *Philippines* refers both to an island archipelago and to a country of over 60 million people. It identifies a unified nation with a single people, the Filipinos, and also a highly fragmented, plural society divided between Muslims and Christians, peasants and city dwellers, uplanders and lowlanders, rich and poor, and between the people of one ethnic, linguistic, or geographic region and those of another. To understand the Philippines, one must understand the conflict between the centripetal force of consensus and national identity and the centrifugal force of division and instability.

Although many institutions have been inherited from a colonial past, their resemblance to foreign models masks the subtle ways in which they have been domesticated into a distinct social fabric. Things may not be what they seem to a visitor. The Filipino's fluency in English, a tradition of pleasing and of avoiding disagreement, innate good manners, and warm charm all help to hide the real inner core of the society. The foreign propensity to discount Philippine institutions as superficial has influenced Filipino self-perception. At a press conference in 1982, Imelda Marcos posed the ambivalence far more candidly than she probably meant: "The Philippines is in a strategic position—it is both East and West, right and left, rich and poor." After a pause she continued, "We are neither here nor there." To study this people in indigenous terms should need no apology or justification, and yet the sad fact is that many people and societies in the past and the present have treated the Filipinos with condescension.

Ignorance, as always, is one cause of that condescension. A lack of close attention even from those who are not ignorant is another. A

third is the temptation to assume that Manila is the whole archipelago, that the elite is the voice of the people, and that concepts such as modernity, progress, and development are good because they are familiar, Western, and trendy. It is all too easy to miss the indigenous signals because of all the international static.

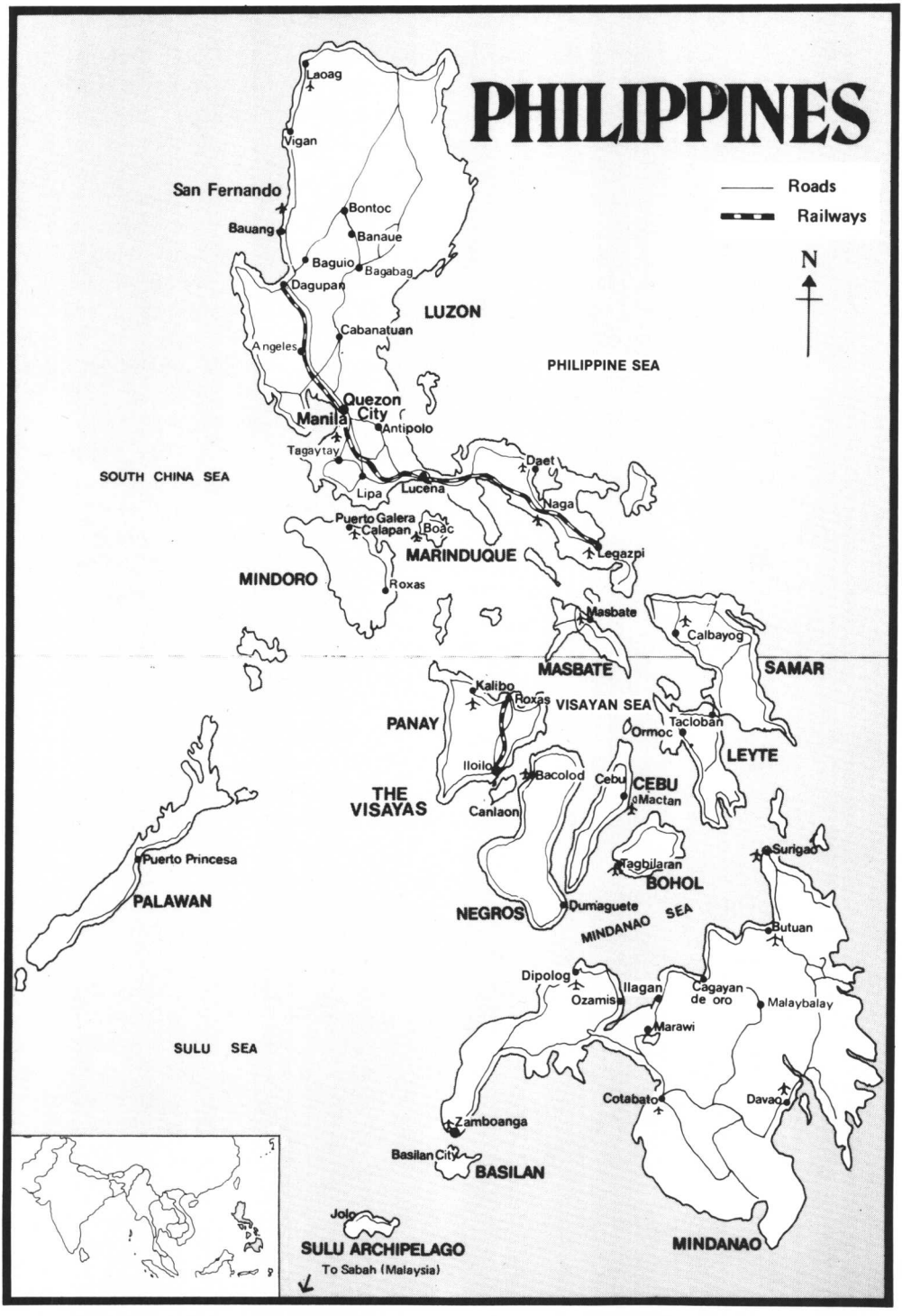
The Philippines: A Singular and a Plural Place is an introduction to this fascinating country. An extended essay based on more than thirty years of study and observation of the Philippines, it is not intended to be a definitive treatise. This book is a charcoal profile, not an oil portrait. It attempts to sketch some of the key factors and experiences that have given the Philippines its particular identity.

The first edition was published in 1982. At that time, Ferdinand Marcos was firmly entrenched in Manila, and Benigno Aquino was in exile in Boston. I had long, fascinating meetings with Aquino, who used my library of Philippine materials extensively. So much has happened since then. This book required massive revision to remain of value. Almost half of the current volume is completely new, and substantial portions of the older text have been revised. Certain portions of material have been drawn from my own previous writings on the Philippines. I am grateful to the University of Michigan Press, the University of Hawaii Press, and the editors of *Pacific Affairs* and the *New York Times* for permission to reuse in altered form what first appeared in their publications.

My personal and professional debts over three decades are enormous. I am grateful to David Timberman for reading and advising me on this edition of the text. Jaime Zobel de Ayala has graciously permitted me to use some of his exceptional portrait photography. Many in the Philippines have shared with me their wisdom and insights: From President Corazon Aquino through all sectors of society, Filipinos have welcomed me, teaching me about their beautiful land. As a member of the International Observer team, I witnessed the fateful election between Marcos and Aquino, and I have heard the roar of democracy and listened to the silent vigil of a nation yearning to be free.

I am solely responsible for the interpretative analysis and any errors in fact. This edition was typed and retyped by my extraordinary secretary and friend, Gail Allan. She now knows more about the Philippines than she ever thought she would, but she never once complained about the burden I imposed upon her.

David Joel Steinberg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SOUTH CHINA SEA
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Malaybalay
Marawi
SULU SEA
Cotabato
Davao
Zamboanga
Basilan City
BASILAN
Jolo
SULU ARCHIPELAGO
To Sabah (Malaysia)
MINDANAO

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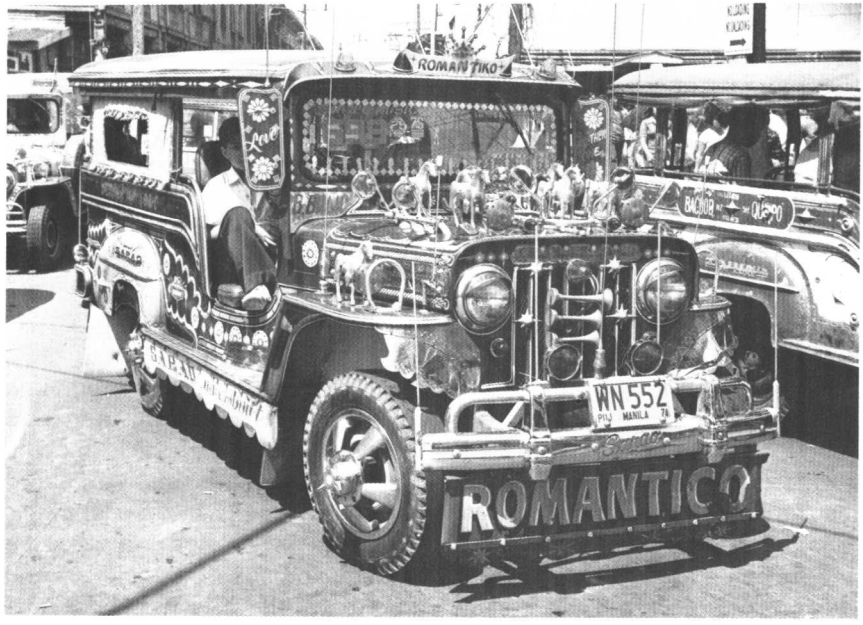
1

The Rules of the Road

The jeepney can serve as the symbol of the Filipinos' journey into modernization. At the end of World War II, the drab, totally utilitarian American army jeep was just about the only type of vehicle moving on the shelled, destroyed roads of the archipelago. These mass-produced instruments of war were stripped down and rebuilt by the Filipinos, who converted them into minibuses capable of holding between ten and fifteen passengers. They lacked comfort but got people around cheaply and quickly. They became and still are the mass transit system not only of Manila but also of the thousands of rural barrios (villages). Decorated with tassels, bits of plastic stripping, foil, mirrors, paint, and virtually anything else that can be attached to the chassis, the jeepneys are a folk art extension of their individual Filipino owners and a vivid example of the way Filipino society has stamped industrialization with a native label. Graced with religious iconography and prayers for divine protection, named with elegance and occasional precision (the Tondo Terror, the Atom Bomb, or Maria's Lover), and covered with devotionals to unknown maidens and/or to the Virgin Mary, the jeepneys bear a kind of noisy witness to the secular faith usually known as "development." But it is not the vehicle but the driver and passengers who are the keys to understanding the Philippines.

Western cultural bias assumes implicitly, but incorrectly, that there are universal truths governing, among other things, the way people drive and the way in which people perceive the space through which they move. Teodoro Valencia, a veteran Manila columnist, commented many years ago that "Manila is the only modern city where it is prohibited to park on the side of the road but not in the middle of the busiest street to change a tire or repair a car." Visitors to the Philippines never cease to wonder at the way in which traffic moves, or doesn't move, and at the way in which people ignore "the rules of the road." A newcomer to Manila is amazed when a jeepney driver, after a quick hand signal out of his open-sided jeepney, suddenly cuts across traffic



A typical jeepney in Manila. (Courtesy of the Philippine Ministry of Tourism)

as if there were no one else on the road. Similarly, it is a common sight to see a disabled jeepney sitting in the middle of an intersection because it has broken down. Although it may have a full complement of passengers, rarely does anyone attempt to push the jeepney to the side of the road in order to permit a free flow of traffic.

Anthropologist Richard L. Stone described this phenomenon as "the private, transitory possession (or ownership) of public property." What Stone argued is that a Filipino sees the space over which he moves in the same terms as stationary space. The space on which he stands is his own, even if in the West if would be called "public domain." Thus, the hand stuck out of the side of a jeepney indicates a trajectory over which the jeepney driver intends to move and a claim to that future space into which he is turning, and a driver whose jeepney breaks down feels little sense of obligation to move his jeep aside, because until he can get his jeep moving again, that intersection belongs to him. This is not simply the erratic attitude of those people who make their living by driving; if that were the case, the passengers in the broken-down jeepney or in the many jeepneys backed up behind would provide, through shouting, noise, or pushing, the necessary impetus to move the jeepney and to assert the public's right to public space.

That mundane example offers an insight into the larger concepts of how Filipinos view private and public, how they perceive an appointment in the public sector or the "sanctity" of personal property. The squatter, and there are millions of them in Manila, builds a shanty out of corrugated tin and bamboo and sees the land on which he builds as his own. The sidewalk vendor or the beggar who opens for business on a crowded street views that pavement as if he owned the lease to the land.

The line between what is public and what is personal is far less clearcut than in the West. Filipinos often see a career in the public sector as a familial opportunity. The obligations of kinship have encouraged nepotism. So much has politics been a way of life that it has often been impossible to distinguish the lines between the bureaucrat and the politician, the politician and the technocrat. This interpenetration of functions has altered the Western-imposed concept of a civil service. Since the holding of office guarantees power and therefore the opportunity for wealth, the scramble to get appointed has cheapened the meaning of service.

In 1949 Senate president Jose Avelino was one of the few officeholders actually censured for gross violations of the law. Turning to President Elpidio Quirino at Malacañan Palace, Avelino asked, "Why did you have to order an investigation, Honorable Mr. President? If you cannot permit abuses, you must at least tolerate them. What are we in power for? We are not hypocrites. Why should we pretend to be saints when in reality we are not? . . . When Jesus Christ died on the Cross, He made a distinction between a good crook and the bad crooks. We can prepare to be good crooks." In the Philippines, few politicians have died poor.

In his pursuit of gain for himself and his family, the capitalist entrepreneur in the Philippines is doing what entrepreneurs everywhere are expected to do; the public servant, however, in his pursuits often seems to be acting in ways that other societies define as corrupt. Venality cannot be condoned nor dishonest behavior excused in the name of social mores, but concepts of good and bad, public and private, and honest and dishonest are no more universal than are patterns of driving. They are shaped by the matrix of values developed in each culture and society across the world. One cannot understand the Philippines without exploring and accepting those values.

KINSHIP AND OTHER RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships in the Philippines are defined in a "we-they" framework to a greater degree than in the West. A Filipino's loyalty is to the

plural identity of his family. The web of kinship and fictive-kinship creates the social environment. The Filipino knows far more about the extended family from which he comes and far more about the network in which he operates than does a mobile American who believes that relationships, even with one's immediate family, can be turned on or off like a spigot. Like ripples on a pond, a Filipino's sense of obligation lessens by gradual degrees as people are further removed from his nuclear family and close associates.

This sense of concentric circles has always been especially important in regard to the obligations of social interaction. Students of Philippine culture have used the phrase "smooth interpersonal relationships" (*pakikisama*) to describe one of the salient characteristics of Philippine life. Philippine relationships have depended on the notion of debt of gratitude or reciprocity of obligation (*utang na loob*), and Filipinos are acutely sensitive to the burden of paying back those favors done for them by others (*puhunan*). The accusation that an individual is insensitive and thoughtless (*walang hiya*) is damning. There is no way that a child can ever repay his obligation to his parents, for example, and the Biblical injunction "to honor thy father and thy mother" is far more a reality in the Philippines than in most contemporary Western societies.

Women in Philippine society have always had a special position. The pre-Spanish *indio* (Malay) society was seemingly free from sexism as children traced kinship bilaterally, and women held power on all levels. Even today, for example, almost all spirit mediums (*baylan*) are women, and they minister to the people through the ancient, animistic rites that form a cultural stratum of the Philippines. The Spanish legacy added an element of courtly respect. The wife was traditionally the decision maker of the family, participating in all key questions of economics as well as of social issues, and she usually kept, invested, and monitored the family money; often represented the family in any bargaining; and certainly shaped all decisions from behind the scenes. As a mother, she had almost total say in decisions concerning the children, including the critical issue of marriage choice.

Corazon Aquino is one of the world's best-known and most respected women. Imelda Marcos was governor of metropolitan Manila; minister of human settlements; promoter of Philippine tourism; buyer of gems; and participant at conferences, coronations, and the United Nations. Aurora Quezon, Luz Magsaysay, Senator Eva Estrada Kalaw, and many others are proof that President Aquino is within, not outside of, tradition. She is a paradigm of what a woman in Philippine society can achieve.

Since each Filipino child traces his or her lineage bilaterally and since each child usually has a large number of siblings, a youngster moves through the world with a wide network of family. The interlocking

of this extended but still intimate family is tended—like the irrigation system of dikes and paddy—with care. In addition, through the bridge of ritual kinship, the base has traditionally been further broadened, although urbanization and rural mobility are weakening this institution. Both sought-after acquaintances and close friends can become fictive-kin by fusing the pre-Spanish custom of blood compacts and the Roman Catholic concept of ritual God-parenthood (*compadrazgo*). In 1521, Ferdinand Magellan sealed his new alliance with the Cebu chief Humabon by serving as *compadre* (godfather). Manuel Quezon, the leader of the nationalist movement prior to World War II and the first president of the Philippine Commonwealth, similarly sealed his relationship with Douglas MacArthur, then field marshal of the Philippine forces, when Arthur MacArthur, the general's son, became Quezon's godson (*inaanak*). By asking a friend or the landlord of someone of economic or social or political importance to serve as *compadre* or as *comadre*, a parent can proclaim to the world at large that the bonds of loyalty now link that individual with the child. Sometimes fate plays odd tricks. Carmelo Barbero, a longtime undersecretary of defense under Marcos, invited Benigno Aquino to be *compadre* and Imelda Marcos to be *comadre* of one of his children. Years later the relationships had soured, but whenever Aquino saw Imelda Marcos, even during their rare sessions at the Waldorf Astoria in New York while Aquino was in exile, they would always discuss the Barbero child.

Frequently in the past, this system was used to establish a kind of life insurance for the child in case anything happened to the parents, and sometimes it has been used to provide a means of upward social mobility for the child, since the parents search for their most powerful friend or acquaintance to accept this religious and cultural obligation of responsibility. Much can depend on this reciprocity, and the child (like Isaac) is the tangible symbol, the living proof of the linkage. The sacrament of marriage similarly ties families together, forging obligations that extend far beyond the immediate in-laws and often involving the farming of lands and the choice of location where the new family will establish itself.

SOCIAL VALUES

Extending beyond real and fictive family are bonds that tie an individual to others from the same town and province, linguistic group, and geographic area of the country. Classmates and fellow alumni of a given university are halfway to kin, Filipinos defining relationships through shared past experiences. Ferdinand Marcos and Benigno Aquino are always described as brothers ("brod") belonging to the same fraternity,