

# Whose nation? The illusion of national unity in the Philippines

As the Japanese Imperial Army advanced south of its empire in the late 1930s, Philippine Commonwealth President Manuel Quezon anticipated a range of reasons why war would be good for Filipinos. War would 'teach our youth, reared in the ease and comfort of an American-protected market, how to suffer and how to die'.<sup>1</sup> In Quezon's words, the Philippine archipelago was a unified nation. But was it really?

President signing the charter that creates Zamboanga, Manila, Philippines 1936



www.zamboanga.com

Iben Trino-Molenkamp

The task of physically unifying the islands posed particular problems, as the archipelago experienced continuous violent upheaval. During the Pacific War, many inhabitants, despite their differing views on political, social and economic issues, took up arms and fought the Japanese forces. Yet, they were hardly motivated by a single Filipino national consciousness. Quezon's words evoke a simple but important question: what and who exactly did he mean when he referred to the Philippine nation and its inhabitants?

National consciousness in the Philippines, as elsewhere across the globe, has often been taken for granted as something inherent to its territory - especially concerning the way in which the Pacific War is remembered. In general, the myth of a colonial experience having produced a mutual understanding between colonizers and colonized, while viewing the Japanese onslaught as a 'watershed' on this continuity, has simplified the war experience as a battle between heroic liberal democracies on one side and everything that defied this on the other. Henceforth, war memory in present day politics and media often connects national identity to selected historical events, in which nation and nationalisms are rendered as monolithic and uncomplicated entities, their identities left unchallenged.

Embalmed within what Reynaldo Ileto has called the liberal image of historical progression, the Philippine nation is often seen as the crown on top of a sequence of 'Filipino' resistance and sacrifices for independence.<sup>2</sup> Yet, not all historical events have contributed to the forming of a single nation. In line with Ileto, what do we do with those events that have not contributed to national consciousness at all?

Questioning Quezon's references to the Philippine nation allows us to highlight the ambivalent and multifarious nature of nationalism, and understand the interests and actions of those resisting colonial rule. More importantly, it allows us to map out various forms of resistance as defying institutional dominance, foregrounding historical developments that expose the contentious nature of nationalism in the Philippines as a system of power similar to its imperial adversary. A large part of this system thrives on political and social exclusion through the classification of people on grounds of class,

religion, ethnicity and gender, while those with access to political power dominantly define their identity as essentially national. The way in which such political systems rationalized identities and extended its legitimacy onto projects of cultural homogenization, hardly ever occurred without violence.

Class, gender, religious, and ethnic differences challenged Quezon's claim to national independence and political inclusion. Traditional rural societies in the Philippine islands were unequally divided and varied in their distribution of wealth and power. Most inhabitants did not see equality as the ultimate social good, but inequality in the early twentieth century differed in many respects from the nineteenth.<sup>3</sup>

In the early twentieth century, specific trends led to general discontent among large segments of society. Drastic population increase and erosion of traditional agricultural ties deepened socio-economic inequalities and solidified class hierarchies.<sup>4</sup> The culmination of these trends incited a small number of large uprisings, of which the Sakdal and Tanguan revolts are well-known, and a vast number of smaller disturbances involving destitute farmers. Many of them, especially across the northern island, gave voice to their desire for a nation that seemed radically different from what Quezon imagined. Amidst a changing economic and social structure, Sakdalistas desired equal distribution of land and immediate freedom from colonial oppression.<sup>5</sup> Their wishes were counter-intuitive to the liberation politics of political elites who desired a slow transition or no independence at all.

The diverse ethnic make-up of the archipelago added to the complexity of nationalist rhetoric. The identity of the Filipino, which was initially self-applied by Spanish Creole communities and later on by mestizo elites, often implied only the Christian inhabitants of the islands. In what was to become an aggressive assimilation process, the cultural-religious and administrative consolidation of the archipelago was to often deny equal status systematically to those deemed 'non-civilized'.<sup>6</sup> Distrusted and ridiculed, Muslims and non-Christian minorities increasingly became a thorn in the side of Christian nationalists when independence became a pressing issue. Facing the upcoming commonwealth status of the Philippines after the Tydings-McDuffie Act, a group of Muslim leaders from Mindanao proclaimed their own independent state in

1935, the BangsaMoro nation, proving their unwillingness to share one flag with Christian fellow islanders.

The popular image of the Philippine nation was also restructured along what Alfred McCoy has called 'severe gender dimorphism'.<sup>7</sup> Although economic developments in the Philippines were not solely responsible for creating gender hierarchies, they have undoubtedly contributed to them. Intersecting with existing gender roles, a spreading capitalist market economy increasingly emphasized sexual divisions of labor and the separation of productive spheres. Despite the many overlapping tasks of men and women, these divisions became rigid and inflexible. The subsequent gendered socio-economic identities echoed back as appendages in what was to confirm a strongly patriarchal nation.

For those on the excluded side of the socio-ethnic hierarchy, there was little in the popular image of the Philippine nation with which they could identify, as this image conveyed the hopes and dreams of a privileged few. In many respects, the social context of the peasantry was different from both the rural elites or the expanding urban middle classes, and the deterioration of living standards in rural areas pushed tenant farmers to fight for survival. This did not mean that the peasantry had no national consciousness. On the contrary; their vision of a Philippine nation was perhaps less based on political inclusion than on social equality.

During the 1930s and the Pacific War, it is clear that many inhabitants of the Philippine archipelago harboured very different, if not opposing, views from those who were appointed to lead the archipelago through war. If one calls the cooperation between the peasant guerilla forces of central Luzon and the American-supported Philippine army a loyal commitment to the Philippine nation, one would overlook large parts of their individual motives to fight an external oppressor. The war did not bring physical alienation among these groups; it brought them closer while facing a common enemy. Yet, this was more out of necessity than out of sharing Quezon's nationalist feelings. After all, much of the organized resistance that mushroomed across the archipelago was caused by the brutality that accompanied Japanese military rule.<sup>8</sup>

One can conclude that by looking at the social categories of class, gender or ethnicity, the islands were not part of a unified nation with one single narrative. Rather, the archipelago was home to a whole spectrum of narratives, each pushed, driven and motivated by different socio-economic or political conditions. A trans-war continuity, Philippine society remained divided and fragmented, and in it, there existed a number of images of the nation that contested, undermined and sometimes complemented each other. It might therefore be more accurate to speak of Philippine nationalisms.

As for Quezon, he imagined his nation to be populated by those similar to himself culturally, politically, socially and religiously - he was referring to his own mirror image. ◀

## Notes

1. Steinberg, David. 1967. *Philippine Collaboration in World War II*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. p.29.
2. Ileto, Reynaldo C. 1985 *Critical Questions on Nationalism: A Historian's view* (published presentation) Manila: De La Salle University Press. p.14.
3. Cannel, Fanella. 1999. *Power and Intimacy in the Christian Philippines*. New York: Cambridge University Press. p.24.
4. Kerkvliet, Benedict. 1977. *The Huk Rebellion*. Berkeley: Rowman & Littlefield.
5. Terami-Wada Motoe, 1988. 'The Sakdal Movement, 1930-34'. *Philippine Studies* 36: pp.131-150.
6. See for example Commonwealth Act no. 141 1936, section 84 and Commonwealth Act no. 473 on the acquisition of citizenship.
7. McCoy, Alfred. 1999. *Closer Than Brothers: Manhood at the Philippine Military Academy*. New Haven: Yale University Press. p.19.
8. Kerkvliet, op.cit. p.68.

Iben Trino-Molenkamp  
ibenm@speakeasy.net