

'Twice forgotten'; 'twice suppressed'

'Twice forgotten' or even 'Twice suppressed' might have been an alternative title for this lavishly illustrated and beautifully designed book which tells the stories of some of the 1500 Japanese men – and their descendants – who came to work on the Benguet or Kennon Road which transformed Baguio in Northern Luzon, into the Philippines' second 'chartered city'.

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Afable, Patricia O. ed. 2004.

Japanese Pioneers in the Northern Philippine Highlands. A Centennial Tribute 1903-2003.

Baguio City: Filipino-Japanese Foundation of Northern Luzon, Inc. maps, ill., apps, 330 pages. ISBN 971 92973 0 1

UNTIL RECENTLY, FILIPINOS OF JAPANESE descent preferred to pass for Chinese *mestizos* or dissimulated their mixed ancestry. This was particularly true in Baguio, the site of the third-largest community of Japanese in the American Philippines before the Pacific War. The early American administration of the Philippine colony (from 1899 onward) was bound to the increasingly strict immigration legislation at home which by the end of the 19th century had put an end to the flow of Chinese and Japanese labourers to America's west coast.

Many American administrators 'on the ground' in Manila and the provinces considered Filipinos unfit for work on the infrastructure needed to fulfil the modernisation promises that accompanied their takeover of the colony from the Spaniards. Manual labour by Americans was minimal, however, so much so that the admission or even active recruitment of Japanese and Chinese was deemed necessary. It was politically unwise, however, to make these 'foreign orientals' visible in public documents accessible to anti-imperialists at home and nationalists in the colony alike.

It is therefore exceptional to find documentary evidence for the presence and work of some 1500 Japanese men who came to work on the mountain highway that had to be hacked out of the mountains to connect the Central Luzon lowlands to the newly projected colonial 'Hill Capital' of Baguio, 1500 metres above sea level. Coming from peasant families in provinces where the new Meiji land taxation caused extreme poverty, the young Japanese men described in this book often spent their last penny to find a place on a ship which would bring them to the Philippines.

After much delay, the 45 kilometres of this Benguet or Kennon Road had been finished in 1905 at the cost of hundreds of labourers who perished from undernourishment, sickness (the 1903 cholera epidemic) and accidents (falls from scaffolding, blasts). Japanese labourers were then laid off and returned home, others went to Manila or Davao. The populous settlement in Davao has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Hundreds stayed on, however, in Baguio as well and found employment in the construction boom, as carpenters, masons, foremen and contractors. New arrivals would link



Top:
The lion's head along the Benguet or Kennon Road is a landmark synonymous with Baguio City.

Above:
The 'hill capital' of Baguio City.

up with them, and several Japanese became entrepreneurs. The story of Baguio, the pet project of the powerful Secretary of the Interior in the Philippine Commission, Dean C. Worcester and his colleague, the later Governor-General W. Cameron Forbes, has been told in many official publications of the time, and in more scholarly post-colonial work by Robert Reed, Howard Fry and James Halsema. However, the role of the Japanese in the formation of the prosperous urban community in the interbellum period has hardly been noticed in those writings, reason enough for the editor and her contributing authors to produce the work reviewed here.

A second, and probably more important, reason for why the Japanese role in building Baguio into the Philippines' second 'chartered city' has been neglected is to be found in the Japanese occupation from December 1941 to April 1945. Having been the most fiercely resistant to the Japanese 'Co-prosperity sphere' of all Southeast Asian nations, the Filipinos and returning Americans deported all Japanese nationals in 1945. Left behind were hundreds of Philippine wives and children of mixed ancestry who had not been registered as Japanese nationals. Even though most of them had not in any way 'collaborated' with the Japanese occupation forces – often the opposite – it became wise behaviour for them to dissemble Japanese ancestry, and take on Filipino names. Even then many of them had difficulty in obtaining access to education and jobs, tagged as they were as relatives of a bitterly hated enemy.

Anthropologist Patricia Okubo Afable and her team, all belonging to the Japanese-Filipino community, should therefore be complimented with their persistent and successful efforts to convince so many descendants of the early Japanese to tell their (grand-) fathers' life histories, to show remaining family documents and to permit reproduction of family photographs with not just the Filipino, but original Japanese names. Extensive research in American collections by the editor,

as well as a lucky find of the archive of one of the Baguio Japanese photographers, added images of the public works, buildings, saw-mills and the early lay-out of Baguio City. Making this book contributed to a growing self-identification and re-building of a Japanese-Filipino 'community' in the late 20th century Philippines.

A broad historical introduction structures the Japanese history in the Mountain Province roughly in phases characterised by successive foci on, respectively: the road and bridge building, construction, and retail trade activities, the latter simultaneously with diversification into agricultural and horticultural enterprises. The later part of the interbellum period saw a rapid expansion of tourism with great opportunities in the hotel, photography and transportation sectors and in which Japanese participated and sometimes succeeded in building an exclusive Japanese 'niche' for themselves. Finally, gold mining made the 1930s in the city and environs a relatively prosperous period, compared to the rest of the country, and again Japanese profited from these chances, sometimes as partners of American or European entrepreneurs. In this chapter and succeeding parts captioned The Building Trades, Agriculture, The Sagada-Bontoc Community, The Japanese Association and the Japanese School, and The Japanese Community, the socio-economic history of the transformation of a pioneer community into a settled, internally diversified and stratified migrant society is reconstructed. Innovations by the Japanese in vegetable and flower gardening, silk production, architecture, retail trading, lumbering and transportation are shown in rich detail, often in combination with biographical notes.

The reliance on mainly second and third generation female descendants as informants for this oral history book guarantees an intimate view on the internal operation of the families. A considerable proportion of the Japanese men intermarried with local women. Inspection of an appendix with names of Japanese men, their wives and children, even if this list may not be representative, yields an estimate of nearly half of the unions being mixed. This seems to belie the popular myth that unlike the Chinese, the Japanese in the Philippines refused to intermarry and integrate into the local society. The women belonged to what were termed 'mountain tribes' by early American anthropologists, particularly those speaking Ibaloy, Kankamay, Bontoc and related languages. These wives played important brokering roles for the Japanese men towards the local economy and society. Continuing to work their own gardens and fields and often trading too, they worked as intensively as the husbands outside the house to sustain their families. Although communication between partners in many cases remained difficult, with neither of the partners having had much education, let alone training in acquiring a foreign language, the impression conveyed by their descendants is one of great marriage stability.

As time went by, however, a certain level of 'Japaneseness' was sustained and later on even reinforced in the group, with the recruitment of Japanese brides by those who could afford it. Successful and rich merchants, contractors, transport entrepreneurs and, later on, wealthy vegetable farmers in the La Trinidad valley founded (in 1924) and sustained the Japanese School of Baguio, which became a focal institution for the migrant group, including some of their 'mixed' offspring. In the late 20th century the school became the trigger for a revival of a sense of Japanese-Filipino identity, as well as linking institution with relatives in Japan.

The character of the book as a centenary memorial shows in the many names and photographs of groups and families, which are important to the descendants, their friends and former neighbours, but less so to the general reader. Several biographies of carpenters, builders, contractors, farmers, prominent businessmen and contractors give the reader a feel both of the family life and the occupational activities. They attest to basic values which these successful migrants impressed on their children and employees, like hard work, honesty and precision. Overlaps in information between the chapters might have been reduced, and the scholarly reader may have liked to read a more explicit analysis of the wealth of data provided in terms of migration or ethnicity theory.

The rich content of the book, however, both in terms of the more than 300 beautifully reproduced photos and of the carefully researched information makes it an indispensable source for a better, more 'bottom-up' understanding of the history, not only of the Japanese pioneers and their offspring, but also of the urbanisation process of Baguio and surroundings in the first half of the 20th century. Hopefully, it will inspire others to retrieve from oblivion, or wilful neglect, the past of similar hyphenated Japanese descendants elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

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