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THE PHILIPPINE PEASANTRY OF THE EARLY COLONIAL PERIOD

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Until a decade ago, knowledge of the beginnings and development of the Philippine rural sector was imprecise and spotty. However, recent interest among local and foreign scholars on local history and the role of agriculture in colonial life has generated new information which provide a clearer picture of the early development of the Philippine peasantry.

The Philippine peasantry emerged with the institution of a feudal mode of production in the country. It constitutes the thousands of agriculturists who have been dispossessed of their land throughout the centuries of colonialism and drawn into the market economy as producers of surplus crops. This transformation was difficult for these farm workers. More than anyone, they were responsible for sustaining colonial rule but in exchange for the countless hardships suffered under those who took their land from them.

This paper shall briefly trace the development during the first two hundred years of Spanish colonial rule which brought lasting changes to the property relations and land tenure system of the rural sector. Any study on the farming structure and nature of the agricultural economy during this period will have to rely heavily on documents and records of friar estates. For while many farming communities remained relatively independent, being outside the immediate control of religious and secular Spanish estate owners until the 18th century, there is not enough information on these communities to allow a more comprehensive comparative study of the different agricultural patterns that obtained in areas immediately exposed to colonial rule. Various farming arrangements were characteristic of the early period and the Filipino peasants reacted and were affected in varying degrees to the imposition of a feudal mode of production.

The proto-peasants of the pre-colonial period

In their historical periodisation of the Philippines, both Guerrero (1972) and Constantino (1975) claim that feudalism developed on its widest scale during the Spanish period. They concede, however, that the genesis of this mode of production may be traced to the pre-Hispanic period. As Guerrero (1975:37) stressed:

> It is not the Spanish colonialists who first laid the foundation of feudalism in the country. The sultanate of Mindanao especially those of Sulu and Maguindanao, preceded the Spanish conquistadores by at least a century in doing so. These were the first to create a feudal mode of production, producing agricultural surplus to support a landed nobility of considerable membership, fighters, religious teachers and traders. The growth of feudalism under the Islamic faith was stimulated by the brisk trade in Sulu.

While there is hardly any source material on the feudal transformation of the southern Philippine communities (except for Majul 1973, on the Islamic Sultanate in the Philippines) a few historical accounts about the indigenous population in Luzon and the Visayas show how this process could have taken place.

At the time of conquest, a sizeable portion of the native population drew its subsistence from agriculture. Rice, sugarcane, as well as a wide variety of fruits and rootcrops were

grown in the island visited by Magellan's crew in 1521, (Blair and Robertson 1903-9). Almost half a century later, Spanish explorers found thickly populated communities along the coasts of Manila, thriving on commerce and agriculture. Swidden cultivation seemed to be most widespread while permanent wet-rice farming was limited to some coastal and riverine-oriented settlements in the islands of Panay, Iloilo, Negros and in the provinces of Pampanga, Pangasinan, Laguna and Batangas. Rice was generally produced for community consumption although there are indications that by the mid-16th century, Pampanga, Pangasinan and the neighboring locales were already producing some surplus (Larkin 1972; Zuñiga 1966).

Pre-hispanic villages were divided into groups of thirty to a hundred families under the leadership of a headman known as the *datu* (Blair and Robertson 1903-09). This social unit, known among the Tagalogs as *barangay*, was essentially a community of freemen (*maharlikas*) bound together by kinship ties and having under them two types of dependents known as the *aliping namamahay* and *aliping saguiguilid*. The land tenure pattern was such that the former worked in the farm, giving half of his harvest and labor services to the *datu* and freeman. He held property rights to his house and personal effects but not to the land he cultivated since this belonged to the *datu*. But the latter had no property right whatsoever; he lived in the house of the *datu* or commoner and performed houschold chores. An isolated but interesting historical observation also points to the *maharlikas* as tenants of the *datus*. They "paid annually . . . a hundred gantas of rice" for the use of the latter's "arable land" (Blair and Robertson 1903-09).

While it can never be ascertained how widespread this practice was in those days, it is likely that there was already a limited exercise of private land ownership whereby the *aliping namamahay* and *aliping saquiguilid* and probably the *maharlikas* also, served as tenants to what was then an emerging *datu* class. For while the *datus* were originally administrators only of communal lands, there is evidence that they were starting to assume purely political functions. Tributes which formerly pertained to communal funds were finding their way to their private coffers. They were starting to accrue private properties, most important of which were permanent wet-rice fields, and acquire other goods of economic and prestige value. This situation can probably explain the relative ease with which the advanced trading communities, especially Manila, adjusted to the Spanish colonial institution of private land ownership.

In general, however, land in precolonial times, especially areas used for wood and grazing, was considered a communal resource while fields under permanent cultivation were probably allocated by the *datu* in usufruct to barangay families according to their need. Certain elements of village democracy still much in evidence during the contract period, balanced the powers of the datus vis-a-vis the rights and privileges of his dependents. Sturtevant (1976:23) adds:

> For several reasons, barangay social stratification escaped rigidity. The delicate web of kinship which bound the community together blurred any tendencies toward caste. Landholding arrangements differed sufficiently to assure a gradual rise and fall of individual fortunes. Complex marital patterns, together with intricate social gradations growing out of them, alleviated the long-term impact of status.

Colonialism and the growth of the peasant sector

Spanish colonialism drew many of the formerly independent and subsistence farming settlements into the mainstream of feudalism. Notable among the major changes it brought about, and which subsequently paved the way for the growth of the peasantry, were the institution of private land ownership, the exaction of tribute payments, labor services

and forced sale of crops, and the intensification of commercial farming during the later part of the 18th century.

There were three types of real property that developed during the early colonial period. These were crown land, land of private citizen acquired through royal grants or purchases and ecclesiastical land acquired not only through royal grants and sales but also through donations from Spanish laymen and "pious" *principales* (Constantino 1975:67) Spanish laws recognized communal holdings and declared the cultivated fields originally held in usufruct by the Filipinos as their private or alienable property. Those not declared as such or were unoccupied, became royal or crown property. However, it is clear that "when lands from settled areas around Manila were given out, much of it had to be taken from the Filipinos already occupying it (Roth 1977:40)." This was the first instance of land usurpation and the practice became so widespread that by 1723, the judge of the court of *Composiciones y Indultos* charged that royal grants had been carried out "with little regard for the welfare and interest of the Filipinos *(Ibid.)*." Between 1571-1626, the colonial government awarded at least 200 land grants to Spanish officials and Filipino *principales* in Manila and surrounding areas. The size of land grants varied; some consisted of just a few *caballerias* (42.5 hectares) or several sitios with a total area of about 2,000 hectares (Cushner 1976:23).

Although the first privately-owned lands were by descendants of the datus and Spanish laymen, the attraction of ready cash, prospects of commerce in Manila, together with the inexperience of the latter in agriculture and inability to adjust to the rigors of the tropical climate, eventually transferred the ownership of these properties to a few hacenderos. Then, once the religious orders obtained a revocation of a royal prohibition against owning real property, they, with the exception of the Franciscans, started to accumulate land property by soliciting death-bed donations, buying and foreclosing mortgages from the remaining secular hacenderos and Filipino farm owners. From here on, the consolidation and concentration of alienable lands in ecclesiastical hands continued unabated that by the end of the 19th century they had full control and possession of more than 215,000 hectares (Roth 1977:2) of prime agricultural lands.

The Jesuits held most of their estates in the province of Tondo (the area that now comprises the different towns of Rizal) while the Agustinians had theirs in Tondo also, as well as in Cagayan, Isabela, Nueva Viscaya, Cavite and Bulacan. The Dominicans held the estates of Naic, Cavite; in Calamba, Biñan and Sta. Rosa, Laguna; and in Lomboy, Pandi and Orion, Bataan. Meanwhile the Recollects owned an estate in Imus, Cavite and another in Mindoro (Constantino 1975:72).

It is interesting that while large tracts of religious lands were presumably acquired through purchases and donations, there is increasing evidence that some were actually leased or simply borrowed from the Filipinos. For example, a sizeable addition to the Agustinian estate occurred in 1619 when several *principales* donated a portion of their communal land. The donation, however, stipulated that the Agustinians should give the *principales* "two calves each year" and failure to do so will revert the use of the land to the Filipino owners. Hence, although the transaction was called a donation, it was actually a lease (Cushner 1976:28). In other cases, the early Filipinos probably allowed the friars to occupy and use their communal lands, "out of respect for the latter" and without surrendering their right of ownership (*Ibid.*). As time passed, however, legal titles to friar estates were made in complete disregard of the fact that some of these were simply leased or borrowed from the natives.

A sizeable portion of religious lands indeed came from outright donations. Roth (1977:43) mentions that the largest single Filipino donation was the land which became

the Hacienda of Orion in Bataan. The others came from Spanish donors and formed part of the Hacienda of Buenavista in Bulacan, the Hacienda of Lian in Batangas, the Hacienda of Imus in Cavite and the Dominican and Jesuit haciendas in Pandi and Lomboy, and in various parts of Tondo, respectively.

Usurpation of contiguous lands was another method used in the expansion of haciendas. This was usually carried out through connivance between the prospective landgrabber and the "underpaid, mercenary *alcaldes mayores* and *governadorcillos*" in undertaking fraudulent land surveys and land documentation. This has not yet been sufficiently documented for Luzon, but in Negros, Bauzon (1974:7) mentions that some of the cases he came across were "simply sensational." One involved 7,000 hectares, with "indio" residents of an entire barrio being dispossessed of their ancestral land.

The *principales* likewise played a major role in facilitating the entrenchment of feudal structures in the country. While the descendants of the *datus* could have inherited some parcels of family-owned land, the numerous cases of land transaction they were involved in during the early 17th century indicate that they were selling communal lands or making donations with or without the tacit approval of their kinsmen or covillagers. However, except for a case that involved the Jesuit purchase of a land in Quiapo from local leaders and which aggravated protest from the villages (Blair and Robertson 1903-09) there seems to be no other documents reporting the sale of inalienable lands by *principales*. It is possible that contrary to the popular view that the influence of the *datus* and their families waned as their traditional powers disappeared, they, in fact, continued to exercise control over native affairs and properties. This could have kept their decisions and actions from being questioned or challenged before the law. Moreover, the *principales'* familiarity with the administrative and legal machinery could have made it easier for them to acquire legal titles to the landholding of their dependents.

It is evident that at this time the bulk of cultivated fields were still in the possession of the Filipinos. The pre-hispanic land tenure pattern still prevailed whereby the dependents who remained as such in view of the persistence of debt peonage, cultivated the lands of the *principales*, and the two shared the harvest. It must be noted that the descendants of the *datus*, once co-opted to the colonial political machinery, exercised certain powers over the native population. They used these powers to acquire the lands of their covillagers. Some chieftains confiscated the token wages paid to *polo* laborers while others lent credit at usurious rates to those who could not meet the *vandala* quotas. In this manner, they acquired more dependents to work on their expanding fields. Although legislations were subsequently passed between 1677 and 1692 banning the whole dependent system, the practice apparently did not cease at this point. In fact, the sharecropping practices that flourished in later times may be traced to this pre-hispanic tradition.

The immediate effect of the consolidation of real property in the hands of the *principales* on one hand and the religious orders, on the other, was the gradual increase of landless laborers, lessees and sharecroppers. Many descendants of the commoners or *maharlikas* were dispossessed of their ancestral lands and therefore, reduced to the status of farm wage workers and tenants.

During the late 16th and early 17th centuries, there was no fixed pattern of estate administration. Some estates were operated by salaried and unsalaried workers, leased wholly or in part to some *principales* or Spanish and Chinese mestizos, while others were worked by entire villages or tenants on a leasehold or sharecropping basis. Salaried labor usually consisted of a *majordomo* (often a Spaniard or Spanish mestizo), cattle herders or *vaqueros* (almost invariably Chinese mestizos), estate

cooks, servants, valets, horse herders and others. The non-salaried laborers, in turn, were debt peons and landless families who provided labor services in return for a small plot of land.

As ranching declined in the 17th century, giving way for more intensive rice cultivation and the limited production of such crops as sugar cane and tobacco, wage labor likewise declined, and many estates turned increasingly to the *inquilino* system of land tenure. Inasmuch as the friars and secular Spanish were generally absentee landlords, estate management was given to an administrator who was usually a lay Spanish mestizo or Filipino lay brother. After every harvest time, the administrator collected the land rent of the *inquilinos,* arranged the delivery of the products to the local market or to Manila and remitted the income from both rents and sales to the estate owners. In some estates, however, these tasks were relegated to trusted *inquilinos,* who, while acting as overlords, made countless and unreasonable demands from farm workers.

The *inquilinos* paid a fixed rent and the amount depended on the size and quality of the land being worked on. In the Tondo estates, for example, the sizes of tenant plots ranged from one or two *cabalitas* (one-half to a hectare) to one *quiñon* (5.8 hectares) (Cushner 1976: 46-48). In the Hacienda of Biñan, the average was one-half *quiñon.* With the expansion of friar estates, the size of farmlands leased to *inquilinos* also increased allowing many of them to sub-lease parcels of their land to sharecroppers or *kasamas.* This arrangement eventually became very lucrative that some *inquilinos* acquired lands of their own and engaged in other profitable business ventures. Others stopped becoming farmers and relegated the job entirely to their sub-tenants. It is interesting that the relative freedom which the *inquilinos* achieved by sub-leasing their fields provided them a tactical advantage for leading and organizing peasant protest movements. The subsequent entry of urban capital in agriculture in the 18th century undermined the stability of the *inquilino* system and gave way for the widespread practice of sharecropping.

Sources of stress and peasant reaction

There were basically two areas of conflict prevalent during this period. One existed between the estates and contiguous settlement, while the other was between estate owners and workers. Although some of the royal land grants and initial purchases of the religious orders and Spanish laymen covered portions of areas used as communal resource by the early Filipinos, there were many more villages which remained relatively independent and outside estate control. However, as friar estates expanded, defining the boundaries that separated these estates from communal lands became a frequent source of conflict. "Disputes over communal woodcutting and grazing areas occured regularly between villages and estates, with the latter denying to the former their traditional communal privileges (Cushner 1976:49)."

In Bulacan, for instance, the villagers once complained that the friars took illegal possession of their land and to compound this crime, they even denied the use of rivers for fishing and the forests for collecting firewood and wild fruits. In Cavite and Laguna, the Dominicans and Tagalogs frequently fought over border lands. In one incident, the former claimed that the pasture lands in a nearby mountain was included in their land grant, while the latter denied this and regularly killed the estate cattle grazing there. Land border conflicts became so acute in these provinces that they served as catalysts for the agrarian uprising of 1745.

The causes of conflicts between estate owners and workers were varied. These emanated from collection of exhorbitant land rent and taxes, the deterioration of sharing agreements, excessive demands for labor services and arbitrary fixing of crop prices. As mentioned earlier, the hacienda structure

consisted of three strata: the estate owner, the leaseholder or *inquilino* and the tenant-sharecropper. Between the owner and the *inquilino,* however, was the administrator who often demanded a share of the produce, over and above the stipulated land rent. Each year at harvest time, the *inquilino* paid the land rent, separated the seed, and divided the remaining crop equally between the sharecropper and himself. Since the sharecropper was at the bottom rung of the hierarchy, he suffered most abuses and demands of the two non-producing sectors above him. Moreover, inasmuch as land rent was deducted from the total harvest and not merely from the *inquilino's* share, the sharecropper in effect paid one-half of the rent. This arrangement deteriorated further in the late 18th century as commercial farming intensified and the peasants became most vulnerable to price fluctuations of farm products and inputs as well as financial manipulation of traders.

The peasant's reaction to abuses of early landowners and the colonial government, which on many occasions took side with the latter, ranged from outright passivity and acceptance of feudal impositions to sporadic displays of hostility. There were several peasant unrests that occurred during the 17th and early 18th centuries. Some were the direct results of abusive colonial and religious policies such as the Pampanga revolt of 1660 while others, although clearly anti-colonial also, took on more nativistic and millenarian overtones. However, the revolt of 1745 was a direct result of the deteriorating agrarian condition in the Tagalog provinces. Filipino peasants took arms to protest the alleged usurpation of their lands by the Jesuits, Dominicans, Agustinians and the Recollects.

Conclusion

There were two types of land tenure that coexisted during the early period of Spanish rule, the indigenous or pre-colonial system and that of post-conquest origin. Spanish colonialism introduced the concept of private ownership and lands held in usufruct by the early Filipinos were recognized as private, alienable property. At the same time, Spanish law recognized the communal holdings of native settlements and only those not declared as such were relegated as royal or crown property. How vigorously this was enforced is uncertain but it is likely that royal grants around Manila involved lands already occupied by Filipinos.

The first privately owned lands, in addition to those held by the native Filipinos were, therefore, crown lands assigned to Spanish soldiers, administrators, *principales* and later, to religious orders. But despite these royal awards, it is evident that the bulk of cultivated lands still remained in the possession of the Filipinos. By the late 16th century, the many descendants of the *principales* and recipients of royal grants were selling their lands. Their attraction to ready cash, prospects of commerce in Manila, together with the inexperience of foreign landowners in agriculture and their inability to adjust to the rigors of a tropical climate, were probably the reasons behind this transfer of property. Meanwhile, the religious orders who were, more than the other colonialists, determined to stay in the country, started buying these lands. From these initial purchases, friar property soon expanded to cover thousands upon thousands of arable land some of which were acquired through various legal and dubious means: solicitation of death-bed donations, usurpation and purchase of contiguous native lands and foreclosure of mortgages.

The early private estates were devoted to cattle raising and agriculture. Some were leased to Filipino farmers while others were managed by groups of salaried and non-salaried workers. However, as ranching declined in the early 17th century, the wage labor system gave way to leaseholding and sharecropping. Then as the friar estate

expanded, a three-rung structure developed: the landowner at the top, the leaseholder or *inquilino* at the middle and the tenant sharecropper at the bottom. Being at the bottom rung, the sharecropper suffered the most from the abuses of those above him, although the *inquilino* was not without his own share of difficulties.

Colonial policies of forced labor and tribute payment exacerbated the already precarious condition of the early Filipino peasants. Not only did they have to contend with a meagre income from a deteriorating cropsharing agreement, but watched with mixed feelings of anguish and anger, the loss of their communal lands to aggressive landowning friars. By the 18th century, conflicts over lands separating the estates from the communal domain of farming villages became so acute in the provinces surrounding Manila. Angered by their repeated failure to reclaim their ancestral lands, the Filipino peasants finally rose up in arms in 1745.

The patterns of landlord-tenant relations which developed at this time practically remained unchanged for the rest of the colonial and post-colonial period. These took deep root and forged changes which gave way for the conditions obtaining today in the Philippine countryside.

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