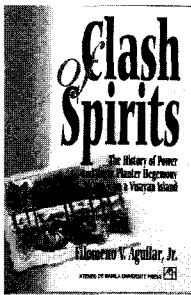


Review Essay

Histories and Texts

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Clash of Spirits: The History of Power



and Sugar Planter Hegemony on a Visayan Island. BY FILOMENO V AGUILAR. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1998. 313 pp.

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Filomeno V Aguilar's *Clash of Spirits: The History of Power and Sugar Planter Hegemony on a Visayan Island* is an ambitious, if not pioneering, book. Spanning nearly four centuries of Negros history and two colonial regimes, its scope is equaled only by the breadth of its reference and the adventurousness of its inquiring spirit. Here in a single work are gathered a veritable Babel of peoples living in, but also moving across, colonial and national boundaries; a congeries of rituals, practices, interests, social classifications and relations; and a panoply of the world-historical developments in politics, economics, history, and culture in which these actors' lives are embedded. How these

seemingly discrete analytical phenomena come together and relate to and transform each other within the Philippine colonial context lends Aguilar's Negros the kind of density and complexity that is often found only within the pages of very thick novels.

TEXTUAL DECISIONS

Indeed, it is Aguilar's storytelling that binds these disparate topics together. The novelty of Aguilar's approach lies in the fact that it uses the narrative form to locate itself explicitly within, but more importantly to bridge, the gap opened up by the methodological division between political economy and cultural analysis, a conceptual division with its own history that has haunted many of the scholarly studies and popular accounts of the history of Negros. Aguilar's textual decision to juxtapose, on the one hand, a study of the interface between world-systemic capitalism and colonial policy and practice in Negros and, on the other hand, an analysis of the 'logic' of particular cultural elements such as the Negros inhabitants' belief in spirits, their insistence on social hierarchy, and

their predilection for gambling, cannot leave the relations between these two motifs of inquiry unquestioned.

In fact, Aguilar shows these categories to be mutually dependent, even constitutive of each other. Viewing culture through the anthropological prism as 'providing the tools for appropriating the world', for 'interpreting reality and temporal existence', and for 'organizing, legitimating, and at other times undermining, the relations human beings sustain among themselves and with the world', *Clash of Spirits* argues that culture cannot be considered a mere ideological effect of the economy, nor should it be thought of as a separate sphere that stands in conceptual opposition to the political and the economic spheres. It is, instead, a social formation that plays a crucial role in forging, reproducing, and sometimes transforming, economic and political relations in the island of Negros (Aguilar 1998).

If nothing else, this book underscores the fact that the way we have come to look at Negros and its problems is mediated in a textual way by generations of historians and other scholars who have written about Negros from the rubric of their intellectual projects. Aguilar argues that the oft-perceived 'problem' posed by the coexistence of so-called archaic and modern elements in the mode of production in Negros is largely an 'artifact of earlier studies', which have treated the Negrenses' spirit-world as a residual and, worse, irrational element of a feudalistic order. These studies

often divide Negros society into two classes, one composed of rich planters and the other of workers, and assigns to each class a separate sphere of behavior and a different, often incommensurable, worldview. It is precisely this dualism that Aguilar questions.

THE 'CORNELL' SCHOOL

To appreciate the import and amplitude of Aguilar's project, we need to locate it within the ambit of two landmark Ateneo de Manila University Press publications that Aguilar cites, but also critically interrogates, in his book. Next year, 1999, marks the 20th anniversary of the publication of Reynaldo C Ilet's *Pasyon and Revolution*. It should also be noted that Aguilar's book came out exactly 10 years after Vicente L Rafael published his *Contracting Colonialism* in 1988. All three of these scholars are Ateneo alumni, and all three books were originally written as doctoral dissertations in Cornell University. And although Aguilar is a sociologist by training while Ilet and Rafael are historians, and although Aguilar focuses on a non-Tagalog region while Ilet and Rafael deal with Tagalog society, all three of them are, as Aguilar notes of himself, Filipino scholars who occupy a mediating position that straddles the imperatives of the nationalist project of making the past 'usable' for present and future Filipinos, and the imperatives of 'abiding by the canons of Western historiography'. If it is possible to talk about these scholars as belonging to a 'Cornell' School, it is

because culture and the analysis of discursive phenomena — in Iletto's case, the *Pasyon Pilapil*; in Rafael's case, the politics of translation; and in Aguilar's case, gambling — play a determining role in all three authors' attempts to explicate the specificity of colonialism in the Philippines and to account for the complexity not just of the native people's resistance against, but also their submission to, the colonial order. These three books also find themselves having to deal with the issue of how to theorize the relationship between 'indigenous' and 'foreign' categories of meaning, an intellectual dilemma that is analogous to — and indeed is actually provoked by — their existential situation as transnational intellectuals (Aguilar being based in James Cook University, Rafael in University of California San Diego, and Iletto in Australia National University) who mediate between two distinct spatial and intellectual locations.

Iletto grounds his pathbreaking analysis of the peasants' categories of meaning as embodied by the language of the *pasyon* in the project of 'understanding the mentality of the inarticulate' (Iletto 1979). Crucial to Iletto's endeavor is his argument (and assumption) that '[i]nstead of glorifying the ancient rituals of the *babaylanes* (native priests) as evocative of the true native spirit, the fact has to be accepted that the majority of lowland Filipinos were converted to Spanish Catholicism.' Iletto posits a post-conversion 'syncretic' culture, through which the peasants made sense of, and actively

participated in, the religious/political movements against the colonial order. As he states in his 'Critical Issues in "Understanding Philippine Revolutionary Mentality",' it is possible to 'delineate in speeches, songs, poems, and recollections the repetition, largely on an unconscious level, of *pasyon* categories of perception' (Iletto 1982). Iletto interprets these *pasyon* categories as the peasants' attempts to 'restructure the world in terms of ideal social forms and modes of behavior'. Iletto is concerned with fleshing out the contours of language use in order to highlight the instability of social discourse; he points out that meanings shift according to specific audiences and contexts. If the *pasyon* teaches subservience to and acceptance of the colonial status quo, it can also express the values, ideals and hopes of liberation from the present order. In fact, it is precisely the people's internalization of the *pasyon* vocabulary that allowed them to note the discrepancy between their ideals (encoded by the *pasyon*) and the realities of injustice and inequality engendered by colonial rule.

PROBLEM OF HISTORY

In principle, then, Iletto has to make a distinction between experience ('what actually happened') and the interpretation of experience ('the complex mediation of remembering'), a necessary 'gap' that he says Milagros Guerrero elided when she criticized his work (see Guerrero 1981). Iletto's work stops short of the dramatic moment when the meanings of the *pasyon*

'overflow' into the human time of the readers of the *pasyon*. Ileta (1979) writes:

What can be *safely* concluded is that because of their familiarity with such images, the peasant masses were culturally prepared to enact analogous scenarios in real life in response to economic pressures and the appearance of charismatic leaders. [underscoring added]

Ileta's caution notwithstanding, the problem of history continues to haunt *Pasyon and Revolution*. One of the key ideas of his study is that 'the masses' experience of Holy Week fundamentally shaped the style of peasant brotherhoods and uprisings during the Spanish and early American colonial periods [underscoring added]'. The 'masses' experience' implies a virtual simultaneity of repetition — what we call the quotidian, or the everyday life — that generates an 'excess' of data. Speaking of the limitations of the patron-client concept for understanding colonial relations, Ileta attempts to resurrect the 'excess' data in order 'to help bring about what [Michel Foucault termed the "insurrection" of subjugated knowledges' which were present but disguised within the body of functionalist and systematizing theory'. Ileta argues that the popular movements provided 'occasions in which hidden or unarticulated features of society reveal themselves to the contemporary inquirer'. His analyses of

the metaphors of *liwanag*, *arwa*, *damay*, and *loob*, and even the register of sound (e.g. unintelligible language) reveal a will to signify a coherent system of thought that is Other to western conceptions of self and society. Like the *anting-anting*, which for Ileta is a 'sign that points to a different order of reality to which the wearer attunes his existence', the repeatable quotidian becomes the sign of a coherent culture.

Yet the most problematic aspect of Ileta's argument centers around the uneasy fit between the coherent system of meaning represented by the *Pasyon* and the experience-oriented practice of 'folk Christianity'. Ileta tries to establish the accountability of one for the other by suggesting that the *Pasyon Pilapil* itself, considered by 19th century authorities as a flawed composition, illustrates the crucial embeddedness of a something-more-than-Catholic experience in the 'units of meaning' that are analyzed in isolation. What is considered 'doctrinal error' or stylistic corruption in the *Pasyon Pilapil* is, as he points out, the effect of a performative history, a 'course of being continually memorized, copied, and disseminated by professional readers and passion play (*sinakulo*) actors'. Ileta sees folk Christianity as a distinctive, creative evolution from the Catholicism introduced by Spanish missionaries in the Philippines. In fact, Ileta carefully avoids using the term 'Catholic' in his analysis of the language of the *pasyon* in order to avoid the commonsensical

associations and attendant teleologies of the term.

But just how uneasy is the fit between the *pasyon* and folk Christianity? In the chapter where Iletto talks about Felipe Salvador, Iletto mentions the report that 'every month, Salvador "had a virgin presented to him in the hope that from this union there would be born a redeemer, a savior of the Philippine islands".' Iletto claims that 'the *pasyon* not so much explains as legitimizes or confirms indigenous notions of power.' But because Salvador's practice does not belong to the categories of meaning even of the *Pasyon Pilapil*, he brings in Benedict Anderson's discussion of Javanese conceptions of power and sexual potency (Anderson 1972) in order to explain the 'indigenous' notion. But what in Iletto's previous and subsequent analysis of the language of *pasyon* has prepared us (and Iletto) for Salvador's dealings with virgins?

I think that what ends up happening in Iletto's narrative is that his effort to construct a grammar, to articulate the conditions of the possibility of meaning, also creates an excess, which goes by the adjectives 'indigenous' and 'folkloric'. Iletto refers to the use of *anting-anting*, the idea of the *lamang lupa*, and the interdictions (eating meat, bathing, working) during the Holy Week as manifestations of an 'older conceptual system' which seems 'incomprehensible to the present'. His own analysis of the *pasyon* thus maintains a disjunction between the *pasyon* and folk Christianity; the disjunction

makes it difficult for us to ask the question of whether or not the *pasyon* could be part of a context in which such residual beliefs and practices function in ways already different from their use in the 'older' time. Insofar as the 'older' system reveals itself in terms of an inassimilable practice, ritual or experience, as opposed to analyzable 'units of meaning', the question of the 'indigenous' in Iletto's telling of history remains unelaborated in *Pasyon and Revolution*.

CONVERSION AND SUBMISSION

Like Iletto's *Pasyon*, Rafael's *Contracting Colonialism* locates the emergence of nationalist consciousness at 'the very limits — linguistically and historically — of colonial rule'. Unlike Iletto, however, Rafael chooses to focus his analysis not on the post-conversion assumption that the colonial encounter laid the grounds for a syncretism of Spanish and Tagalog idioms and practices, but on the fact of conversion and the network of exchanges (linguistic and historical) between ruler and ruled that it opens up. In other words, Rafael explores an 'alternative history of submission' that exists in a 'residual' relation to Christian, colonial, humanist and nationalist conceptions of history (Rafael 1988). The question, for Rafael, is this: How did the Tagalogs differ from and defer to Spanish intentions regarding language, religion, and politics? The answer is, necessarily, that it is 'impossible to see the Tagalog position as either clearly opposed to or unequivocally collabora-

tive with the colonial order represented by the priest'. Herein lies the possibility of tracing the emergence of both the colonial regime as well as resistance to it 'before and during the formation of nationalist consciousness'.

This alternative history of submission in part arises from Rafael's decision to focus on the way the 'imposition' of the colonial order is mediated by language. The process of conversion (and conquest) is metonymic of the process of translation in that both involved not only the delineation and crossing of boundaries, but also the attempt at restructuring through exchange and substitution. For Rafael, these processes are asymmetrical by virtue of the unequal relations between the ruler and the ruled. But if Catholicism provided the Spanish colonial enterprise with its 'ideological frame', even as the structure of colonial rule was embedded in the practice of religious conversion, this conjuncture of colonial ideology and religious conversion cannot escape the operations of language and the vicissitudes of this operation. Thus, Rafael explains that the new 'logic' of the Spanish did not only imply a new kind of power relation between the ruler and ruled and the social divisions it creates, but a new practice of 'encoding interests, reinventing the religious and political means for conceiving the link between self and society in Tagalog culture'. This new practice consisted primarily in the insertion of a 'third term' in the relations of linguistic and historical exchange — God (and, by extension,

the King and the Law) is introduced as the source and authority behind the exchange between the priest and the native. The intention is to orient the native to a hierarchy of authority (e.g. politics is an instance of divine patronage that allows the king to distribute land and offices to the subjects), which in itself already circumscribes the 'site of exchange and circulation of the Word of God'.

DOMESTICATING COLONIALIZATION

Rafael sees the Tagalog response to colonial rule and conversion as rooted in the Tagalogs' attempts to domesticate the potentially if not actually dislocating effects of the 'shock' of colonization. Rafael relates the need to construct a context for the new experience, i.e. the need to translate, to the Tagalog idioms of reciprocity and exchange: that is, the Tagalogs' attempt to 'contract' colonialism by 'circumscribing its reach' (drawing boundaries of difference) and 'regularizing [their] dealing with it' (deferring to it in the sense of entering into a relation of exchange and reciprocity with the Spanish for the purpose of getting some of the 'surplus'). The process of contextualizing is based on the idea of the untranslatability of terms like *Dios*, *Espiritu Santo*, *cruz*, and *Doctrina Cristiana*, an untranslatability that allows for the possibility of different readings, and hence, appropriation. This rereading of untranslatable terms works in ways similar to the operation of language; through 'misreadings' of Spanish intentions in the light of their

interests, the Tagalogs managed to 'elude'/'evade' (if not marginalize) the Spanish priests' universalistic claims to authority. One example would be Tomas Pinpin's *Librong Pagaaralan*, which disregards Spanish grammar, and subordinates meaning and referent to the acoustic 'fit' between Tagalog and Spanish, thereby undermining the hierarchical distinctions between Castilian and Tagalog, as well as rendering their correspondence a matter of chance/risk. Submission to and incorporation of the language and logic of Christianity are characterized as random rather than systematic.

Yet Rafael takes pains to point out that one of the limits of the imposition of colonial authority is precisely the revelation through translation of the 'impersonal workings of language' as seen in his discussion of Pinpin and of the 'emptying' of meaning that accompanies native repetition of untranslatable terms like Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Rafael puts discourse analysis to good use in his chapter on the sacrament of confession, which validates God as the source of mercy and constructs the narrative of salvation as well as a divided self (the conscience and the sinful self).

It is Rafael's discussion of the Spanish transformation of the Tagalog notion of death, however, that interests me because it pushes the critique of religious syncretism to its limits. Rafael brings up Iletto's discussion of *loob* and highlights the fact that Iletto often uses the term to refer to an interiority that is both privileged as well as a priori.

Rafael favors a non-ontological definition of *loob* that is cognizant of its 'semantic instability' (indexing both the inside of a person as well as of an object). The *loob*, for Rafael, is the 'site and object of exchange', that is, its constitution is inseparable from the process of exchange.

Since the Tagalog notion of reciprocity and exchange are asymmetrical (one defers the payment of debt by tokens of indebtedness, more in order to relieve the pressure of payment than to abolish the debt), Rafael explains that the appeal of the Spanish notion of Paradise for the Tagalogs lies in its promise of perfect (unmediated) exchange which abolishes hierarchy, however arbitrary it is as practiced by the Tagalogs, and in its promise of full payment of mortal's debt to God. Given Rafael's focus on examining the 'structural ambiguity' of Christianity and the mediation of Tagalog response to the ambiguity in light of native idioms, how do we then conceive of the link between Spanish rewriting of Paradise and the Tagalog's attraction to this rewriting? The question I raised in the section on Iletto can also be raised here: What exactly was the transformation that took place? Was the concept of Paradise a non-hierarchical concept that resonated with a pre-colonial idea, or was it a new concept that was created through the mediation of the new logic? This question, for Rafael, is deferred to another temporal plane: 'Indeed, it is not until the early 18th century that we have sustained evidence of Tagalog conversion that

coincided with rather than circumvented Spanish intention.' I wonder, though, if such a resolution is as neat as Rafael would have it. But then again, this problem may be a consequence of our not having documentary proof.

GAMBLING AS IDIOM OF POWER

Now, in *Clash of Spirits*, Aguilar addresses the dualism that bifurcates the 'indigenous' and the 'foreign' through his account of the centrality of the discourse and practice of gambling in understanding Negros history. Gambling, which operates through a set of regulations (what we might call 'the rules of the game') that nevertheless remains open to the risks of chance and contingency (codified as 'getting lucky'), becomes a metaphor for colonialism and for the specific acts of submission, negotiation, or resistance on the part of colonizer and colonized alike that are engendered within the system. Unlike Iletto and Rafael, Aguilar theorizes early colonial history and the natives' contradictory relationship of submission and/or resistance to the colonial order not in terms of the vicissitudes of interpretation inherent in the operation of language, but in terms of the collision and interaction between two generalized worldviews or systems of knowledge. Gambling is the 'idiom' through which the so-called *indios* perceived the fact of colonization as entailing a clash between 'their' spirit world and the Spaniards', a power struggle the outcome of which was determined not so much by moral

issues pertaining to what was right or wrong as by the natives' perception of the show of strength or the displayed prowess of the victor. The categories of 'indigenous' and 'foreign' are sometimes treated heuristically as distinct ideal forms in *Clash of Spirits*, but Aguilar takes pains to argue that these conceptual categories are mutually contaminated and indelibly marked by each other: for example, inasmuch as natives attempted to appropriate 'friar power' through a reorganization of their shamanic practices, the friars also appropriated native spirits while inserting their cosmology into the local belief system.

The parallelism that Aguilar establishes between the three-world Spanish cosmology and the multi-tiered Hindu world of the native cosmology during the early years of colonial contact opens up the theoretical possibility of conflation but also, ironically, of differentiation that 'allowed natives to perceive the colonizers as similar to themselves despite overt signs of differences, while allowing Spanish priests to locate the native religion in direct cognitive opposition to Catholicism'.

More importantly, *indio* politics springs out of the tension and the ambivalence generated by the natives' act of 'wagering on the odds of power' and their 'wandering' between these two realms of power and signification:

If one was caught in an inescapable situation where equal appeasement of the realms was not possible, it

became a sheer case of bad luck. Otherwise, the *indios* moved back and forth between the overlapping worlds constituted by the indigent and the colonial in a gamble that they would not be caught in either one. Simultaneous avoidance and acceptance of the clash of the spirits was graphically encoded in the various forms of gambling that flourished during the epoch of the Spanish colonial rule. (Aguilar 1998)

But gambling, too, is an indispensable component of the dynamic reproduction and legitimation of power relations in the island in the period of transition between Spanish and American rule. To be sure, Aguilar argues that the culture of gambling is inseparable from the material forces through which society and history take shape. For example, he contends that the material process of sugar production, which involved the crucial mediation of the planter-owned muscovado mill that transformed raw cane stalks into the clayed sugar which was the basis of the cash advance given to the laborer at the start of the planting season, cemented the bond that tied the laborer inexorably to the planter during the late 19th century. Moreover, this material basis for labor control was supplemented by an elaborate 'gift economy' that extracted concessions in the form of social obligations from the planters while enabling the planters to appropriate the surplus labor time of the tenants.

MONEY AND NATION

But Aguilar also argues that '[g]ambling was the foundation of the sugar-export economy and society'. That is, gambling provides a broad theoretical framework, call it a grammar, for understanding the patterns of behavior of the *hacendero* class, which deployed the gambling mentality to make 'systematically calibrated moves that contravened colonial state regulations concerning labor and land'; at the same time, the risk-taking that is inherent in the very nature of gambling necessarily foregrounds the idea of historical contingency, which is evident in Aguilar's account of how the *hacendero* class wagered on the odds of American interest in, and colonial acquisition of, the Philippine islands, the subsequent incorporation of the economy of Negros into the American capitalist order, and the concomitant entry of the *hacendero* class into the arena of 'national' politics.

This gambling mentality is, therefore, not a natural attribute of the Filipino national character, but a socially dynamic matrix of behavior and interests that derives its legitimizing power from colonial institutions and from the historical shift in popular associations surrounding the notion of 'foreign capital', on which the sugar-export economy of Negros had come to depend despite the religious order's condemnation of the international capitalist system. Seen in this light, it comes as no surprise that the nationalist imagination of the *hacendero*, from its inception, took on a decidedly anti-

friar cast. The pervasiveness of the gambling mentality also hinged on the multifarious connotations surrounding the concept of money, which helped to blur hitherto entrenched social distinctions that characterized the 'plural society' (to use J. Furnivall's concept) during the colonial times, even as it emphasized, at one and the same time, the racial and social differentiation that divided that society. In Aguilar's playful prose, 'money and nation would [henceforth] dance around each other'.

REINSCRIPTION AND THEORIZATION

Moreover, Aguilar privileges gambling as a signifying system in order to account for how the rest of the inhabitants of the island comprehended and legitimized the socioeconomic transformations in their island. 'In Negros, the view of society as an egalitarian gambling match has provided a cogent justification for the huge disparities of wealth that persist today: the affluent *manggaranon* have *suwerte*, the wretched *imol* none.' If gambling began as a 'creative response to colonialism in the earlier era', it became 'the very channel of alienation in a later era'. The contradiction between capital and labor is simultaneously played out and effaced in the folklore that depict the spirit world as an extension of *hacienda* life the relations within which are conceived in kinship terms as a social hierarchy that is nevertheless riddled with power struggles where might often supersedes right.

Aguilar thus reinscribes some of the key issues addressed by Iletto and

Rafael while offering a significantly different methodological framework for interpreting native negotiation within, or resistance against, colonial rule. For one thing, his approach is more broadly historical than Iletto and Rafael's, and covers more temporal ground. There is room in the book for a discussion of Spain and of the trauma wrought by its crumbling empire in the minds of Spanish policymakers who had to make the Philippines a viable colony; of the ways in which the Visayans defined the human through their concept of the *dungan* (life force); of the myths surrounding some of Negros' most prominent and colorful *hacenderos*; and of the challenges posed by reworked *babaylan* movements from the fringes of colonial space.

Best of all, culture and political economy, and the links between them, are theorized rather than taken for granted or ignored. Aguilar assigns agency not to language per se, but to 'migrant *mestizos*, *indios*, friars, Chinese, colonial officials and foreign merchant capitalists [who] gambled their way through the *terra incognita* that was Negros, in time crafting a peculiar world of Masonic capitalism on this central Philippine island'. I would have wanted Aguilar to extend his study to cover the Negros of the Commonwealth and post-war periods, but this would have entailed another book or two. With luck, we won't have to wait another 10 or 20 years for another pathbreaking book to find its way into print.

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