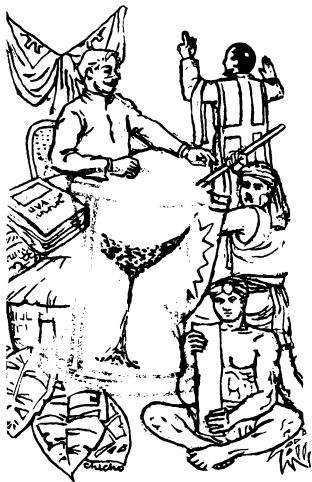


Beneath the pile

Rediscovering Our Past

By Horacio de la Costa, S.J.



THE SEVENTEENTH and eighteenth centuries are undoubtedly the most neglected period in Philippine history. There are several reasons for this. One is the barrier of language. The younger generation of historians have had a formal schooling which does not (normally) equip them with even a reading knowledge of Spanish. Thus, unless they take the trouble to acquire this necessary tool by themselves, the bulk of the source material for the period in question is inaccessible to them. They are obliged to make what they can out of the few documents translated into English—chiefly those in the well known collection of Blair and Robertson. We cannot, of course, be sufficiently grateful to these industrious compilers for making available what they did; the point is that this is practically all we have in English, an infinitesimal fraction of what they were unable or did not choose to translate. In effect: our knowledge and interpretation of two centuries of our history remain today substantially as they were fixed fifty years ago by two American scholars.

But there is more than the barrier of language between us and the documents. The vast bulk of them is physically inaccessible to the ordinary investigator. The historian of almost any other nation which originally formed part of the Spanish empire has at his disposal any number of published

collections of documents, more or less critically edited. They may vary in completeness or faithfulness to the original manuscripts, but they are at least usable in the sense that any student may expect to find them in the major public libraries. In the Philippines, collections of this kind can be counted almost on the fingers of one hand. What indeed do we have? We have Retana's *Archivo del bibliofilo filipino*, five small octavo volumes; we have Pastells' edition of Colin's *Labor evangelica*, in which excerpts from the Philippine section of the Archives of the Indies are used to illustrate the text; and having mentioned these two, we are hard put to it to name a third. Not that no other documents have been published, but they have been published in obscure periodicals outside this country, or in limited editions long since out of print and now almost as rare as the manuscripts themselves.

For basic research in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, then, we must go to the manuscripts. Where are they? They are scattered in archives and libraries all over the world. However, the largest concentrations are in the Archives of the Indies in Seville and the National Archives in Manila. To go to the first is out of the question for all but a happy few Filipino historians. The second is here indeed; but who knows what it contains? It has

neither catalogue nor calendar, and lack of funds for maintenance and servicing has reduced it to a mere pile of rapidly disintegrating paper.

THUS, IT SEEMS impossible at the present time for the scholar who is not on a fairly generous research grant to undertake any study of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which will be solidly based on an adequate reading of the sources. This consideration is enough to send most students away in search of greener pastures; the period of the Revolution, for example, or contemporary social or economic history. Still, if one is persistent and willing to settle for limited objectives, he has an option. The period is covered by a number of narrative histories and annals written by the official chroniclers of the religious orders in the Philippines. Some of these are fairly extensive and detailed, such as that of the Augustinian Fray Gaspar de San Agustin and his continuator Fray Casimiro Diaz. Others run into several folio volumes, such as the Dominican histories begun by Fray Diego de Aduarte. All of them deal not only with the history of their particular Orders but with general ecclesiastical and secular history as well. In fact, at least one of them, that of the Recollect Fray Juan de la Concepcion, is professedly a general history. Its fourteen volumes form

the basis of the one-volume survey published in the nineteenth century by Joaquín Martínez de Zuñiga, through which, by the way, Concepción's version of many of the events and institutions of his period has passed, wittingly or unwittingly, into our modern textbooks.

These are definitely secondary sources, save for those events occurring within their authors' lifetimes which fell under their direct observation. They were written from a point of view and under the impulse of preoccupations which are not those of the modern secular historian. Still, an astonishing amount of information can be derived from them, if one only had the patience to read them through and the broad understanding to transpose the essential fact from their antique idiom to ours. But it is precisely this patience and understanding which we lack, and this is the third reason why so large a portion of our history has been so singularly neglected. For many of us, these "monkish" chronicles are almost entirely worthless, being written by men who were either naively credulous or thoroughly bigoted and very often both. This was the position taken by the originators of our nationalist movement, for reasons understandable enough in the circumstances in which they found themselves. Unfortunately, by making the perpetuation of this outdated anticler-

icalism an act of patriotic piety, we deliberately cut ourselves off from a significant section of our national past, and render our reconstructions of it open to the identical charges of naivete and bigotry.

AT ANY RATE, I see no valid reason for assuming *a priori* that a seventeenth-century Spanish cleric is congenitally unable to perceive a historical fact, and having perceived it, to express it in suitable language. Incidentally, we may as well clear up a minor point before we proceed. The clerics in question, be they Augustinians, Franciscans, Dominicans or Jesuits, did not write "monkish" chronicles, for the simple reason that they were not monks. True, Marcelo del Pilar wrote with bitter eloquence about "monkish despotism"—*la soberanía monacal en Filipinas*—but does the fact that Del Pilar was a patriot justify our perpetuating his inaccuracies? Any handbook of Catholic information will explain the difference between a monk and a friar; yet how many otherwise reputable scholars who undertake to write on Spanish or Spanish colonial history bother to look it up? Admittedly a minor detail, from which no argument can be derived against the essential reliability of their narratives. But then, why are we suddenly so much more exacting when there is a question of a "monkish" chronicler? Because Pedro Murillo Velar-

de believed that a hair of the Blessed Virgin Mary's head was in his day preserved in the church of San Pedro Makati, does it follow that his splendid account of the Moro wars does not deserve examination? Because Archbishop Pardo of Manila spelled Wyclif "Ubi cleff", are we to conclude that he was an ignorant persecutor of Protestants? And while we may rightfully take issue with Gaspar de San Agustin's delineation of the Filipino character, are we obliged to throw his evidence out of court even on those points where his *idee fixe* is not involved?

By all means let us read these histories critically; but let us read them. Only by doing so can we reestablish contact with those vital roots of our own culture from which the Revolution and the

subsequent American regime tended to cut us off. It is sometimes alleged that we Filipinos have no culture of our own. This is demonstrably false. A more accurate statement would be that by and large we have no very deep or sharply defined consciousness of how tremendously rich and varied our culture is, and this because we have been accidentally—and, it is to be hoped, temporarily—severed from the historic origins of that culture. We must rediscover our past; and one good way of going about it is to renew our interest in the two hundred-odd years between the *conquista* and the opening of the Suez Canal when the Philippines ceased to be merely an archipelago and became a nation.—*Philippines International*.

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Who's Boss?

"Tell me—who is the real boss in your home?"

"Well, my wife bosses the servants—and the children boss the dog and cat—and...."

"And you?"

"Well, I can say anything I like to the geraniums."

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