

Manila Sunsets: Native Philippine Psychology

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The sunset over Manila bay is often of a peculiar and indescribable beauty. Phenomena of the most celestial magnificence, accompanying the setting of the sun, are common here; but occasionally the loveliness of the whole scene is transcendent. First, a gossamer transparency pervades the atmosphere—argenteo tinted, of a diaphanous lustre, like the silvered silken arras of a majestic theater, into the perfection of which have gone the munificence of the gods and the glutton sensuality of demigods. The city, with all its suburbs round the shore, is, it seems, brought together in an audience of half a million souls, to view the tableau that shall presently unfold in the western heavens. This illusion, of a great concourse of nature worshippers, is enhanced immeasurably by the glower of clouds over the eastern mountains. Surely a skilled attendant is there, dimming the amphitheater and focusing an Ormuzdian effulgence where the attention and devotion of the worshippers are already drawn, and now await with avid expectancy what can no longer be delayed.

The vesper hour. It is the moment for the overture. Deep, distant thunder, rolling through the green caverns of the eternal hills, reverberates in the rhythmic and sonorous periods, as of a solemn march or processional.

The theme of the music itself is traced by nearer sounds: a thousand romping children on the Luneta, the splash of the tide on the boulevard wall, from which careen, with shouts upon canoes, roves anon to the beach, the brown athletic bodies of many youths, diving into the ripples and shadows of the bay. Motors purr along the drive slowly, and finally pull up at the curb anywhere, that even the gay and the courted may pay momentary homage to divine and superior beauty.

A married harlot is there, with her paramour. Young rascals trail the slow-strolling footsteps of convent girls—white blouses, jet braids, red ribbons and jaunty blue skirts—guarded by the convent mothers to whom, it almost seems, the foster-maternity is an ostentation. Clerics with the lads, in black, high-buttoned cassocks, bow esthetic acquaintanceship. The gaze even of old men leaning upon canes, roves anon to the chatter of little troops of *mestiza* maidens, those matchless exquisites of mixed consanguinity heritage, none of whom, naturally enough, lacks gallant cavaliers.

The lush of life, of matehood and the renewal of life, touch the awakened senses like a fragrance from urns sacred to rife paganism. The choral of mellow sound arises from the hearts of thoroughly mundane creatures, whose god is the god of fame and harvest, of storm and haven—the on the seagirt isles and the sea itself—the god of fair hopes, foul despair, regnant passion.

The sunset presently will depict the moods of the people. The pellucid atmosphere, strange, almost supernaturally, has the effect of bringing things closer by leagues and leagues. Mariveles seems not distant at all. The wire-

less towers of Cavite, on historic old Sangley Point, are apparently stalking right out across the bay, like huge and grotesquely animated skeletons. Even the low campaniles of Cavite churches appear in distinct gray outline: a few times, through a few centuries, the glow and glamor of an unusual eventide have thus shown over them. Decaying marine rubbish, the wraiths of old ships, can be faintly discerned along the shore of the point; but the gibberish of coolie crews, working at galloon hulks under the lash, is silent in history—along with the babble of mandarin merchants, bartering Asiatic wares for Mexican and Peruvian silver.



Southward, as if in the midst of Pasay village, so near it seems, looms Mount Banahaw. One half expects to make out the legends on its rocky mantle, or to surprise woods creatures indulging evening carousal in its forests.

Imperceptibly the breeze over the waters freshens. The curtains, cumulus portents, draw aside. The sunset comes. The tableau is the state appearance of the god of gods, *Barthala*. The festal colors are all those of divine royalty—with red for fire, the fiercest element, the vengeance on man of every god to which he ever raised a temple or bowed his bewildered mind. The clouds are, of course, in sables, bewailing a supremacy they must acknowledge in the passing Prince of Light. Rays like fairy's wand's reach out to touch them and bestow a generous monarch's greetings. Their sables are soon silvered over; and then they are adorned in gold, to share vicariously the pomp and glory of their royal master.

If ever the hosts of heaven sang, surely they do so now. The sea, too, joins the hosanna.

The god of gods tosses her a purple robe, which she wears in all becomingness. Where the imperial color is lacking, for want of shadow upon green, there hang long, shimmering jade pendants, half concealing modesty, half revealing strumpetry in the wanton creature.

Omnipotence, the serenity of all lesser things, is the plain motif of the tableau. The largesse of the journeying sun, retiring with whom he will beyond the portals of silken purple and gold, is almost contemptuous. The amenities of a public occasion are, however, complied with, though but disdainfully. Impatiently the royal purse-strings are loosened, that coins of gold may shower upon the worshippers, not innocent of avarice and envy.

"Disperse ye!" Such seems the gesture of the sun setting over Manila bay. "Disperse ye, men of earth, creatures of a day. If I would, I might tell tonight how many will be cuddled in their graves tomorrow. All will be there soon. Whilst the sea, my sweet mistress, and the mountains, where even demigods dwell

forever, and the primal forests, with dignity enough of their own never to bow really low before the hosts of heaven—these are all the true peers and companions of my eternal age, eternal youth. Disperse ye!"

Darkness comes quickly, when the sun goes; it is docile and obedient to the fierce mood of light.

Such is the setting of the sun over Manila bay. At the mouth of the bay the *Mariveles* headland rises to a grand height. Clouds gather round its summit. The phenomena of grandeur and magnificence come from the reflected and refracted light of the noblest orb of the firmament, receding into the purple depths of the China sea. Filipinos swear by *Langit*, the sky. They do well. They swear by *Barthala*, god of light, the sire and senior of the universe. They do well. Their souls are one with Nature, amid whose most superb and perpetual beauties they dwell in simple acceptance of whatever fate an inscrutable, will vouchsafes them. They do well.

"Thy will, O God, thy will, not mine, be done!"

By such submissiveness to the divine, the flesh resigns itself to what the day or the night has in store. If it be pleasure, it is pursued; if its bouquet is enjoyable, no course bursts forth against its dregs. If it be sorrow, have not many sorrowed? And who are the humble, to rail against that which, though it mortify the flesh, surely exalted the soul?

Filipinos never had to learn Christianity, nor have they learned it. Its teachers despised them because they were pagans, and reviled them in many *relations* sent to Rome; but the precepts of its founder they knew from the beginning, and He himself must have had these principles of moral conduct from some shrine of philosophy in the East not far from the region of their own origin. His preachments are a part of them, and no mere cloak to wear in public; and what the West will never learn, though it memorize assiduously and send forth many missionaries, they, of the East, will never forget; since with them it is not something learned, but something breathed and lived. They render unto Caesar, they revel at Cana, they enter and Gethsemane. They have it from their ancient creed, not the new, that the soul may cast down the rock of the sepulchre.

The world does not understand the Filipino; it is not quite aware of just what sort of man he is, or may become. Four centuries ago crusaders defamed him as an infidel, and pronounced him savage and backward. He was, too, but just as the crusaders' own near ancestors were, not much earlier in history. Extraneous influences elevated them; the same influences did not touch him, so it is not his fault that he remained rather lower in the scale, and he need not be ashamed of it. When the crusaders' ancestors were living in mud huts, the Filipino's ancestors were dwelling under thatch. How the one people, the people of Europe, went on from mud huts to stone mansions and vaulted cathedrals, while the Filipino continued living in his humble thatch cottage and knew no altars but the natural ones of the forest and the mountain cavern—this is the truth left out of the biased and inept histories. Better said, per-

haps, it is written plainly in history, but that quaint book seems to be inscribed in unintelligible hieroglyphics for the many who delight in sheer repetition of its pages in the classroom.

The West advanced, but it did not leap forward by lifting itself by its own bootstraps. If this fact were but recognized, the Filipino, who did not advance much, would feel himself less inferior, and the world would have a less disdainful regard for him. It is therefore clearly to the advantage of America, his tutor in modern life, to learn something of him, and of the reasons for his being what he is. (He is, of course, spoken of here as a mass of people; the limited higher social levels, remarkably influenced by universal culture, are not referred to in this study.) Briefly, then, he did not conquer Greece, nor take Greek slaves into his households to inculcate in him Hellenic culture. He did not trade with the Phoenicians, so he kept an alphabet of his own instead of adopting theirs. He did not domicile Saracen hordes in his country, so he did not borrow their arts, including medicine and astronomy. Merchant Jews did not swarm over his islands, where trade would not have been profitable, so he never had the benefit of their large fortunes in cash, and their invention of international exchange bills, for the carrying out of great enterprises. He never went crusading against the Turk, to bring back the learning and the comforts and luxuries of the Levant as booty. Vicariously he now suffers the stigma of African slavery, of which he was always in ignorance; the lingering blur of this in men's minds still, to a degree, affects him too. Time will wear it out, but only time can do so.

Over in China and India was much learning, but the adjacent Philippines were only sparsely settled islands, with the vacant Pacific beyond—inviting no commerce. Learning flowed westward, through the routes of trade, which were also the routes of war. Now, at last, the routes of trade have reached and tapped the Philippines. There is far less war, far more commerce and international accord; and the latent wealth of Philippine soil is being touched into gold. The stimulus of that big ocean commerce which

finds its principal outlet through Manila port, is awakening the Filipino from the sleep of centuries of quiet and sodden isolation. The government, protecting commerce, takes toll of it and pours this constant stream of taxes into education and divers public benefits and improvements. Social changes occur. The East is fatalistic. The Philippines partake of that fatalism. The impatient, nonmeditative, *practical* West beats upon this fatalism. It is not wholly mordant, gradually it undergoes modification. If it may only be permitted to suffer—this is the native Indian inheritance—then come what will, and welcome.

The mortifications of this mundane life are despised in the heart of eastern peoples who remain a peasantry of unlettered mystics, tribes and backward, until commerce breaks the spiritual bonds.

In the Philippines the modern forces are at work, quite busily, one would say, certainly impatient of the cloying past. And the reason these forces are at work so industriously is that the United States, when American traders with the Far East, she sails her ship westward; time's game, as to the Philippine, was to wait until America spread from ocean to ocean and built a thousand cities full of factories with insatiable appetite for raw tropical supplies.

But time has never changed the sunsets. They remain exquisite etchings of his magic brush; and Manila, enigmatic, hybrid, paradoxical, ancient, medieval, a modern of moderns—this all in one character distinctive only of herself—Manila remains one of the most fascinating seaports of the world, America's metropolis in the East that has the Spanish-mission past that so many *neo-Yankee* regions share. The Spaniards, with their remarkable genius for place names, vulgarly called the Philippine: *las islas del poniente*, the sunset isles, because the galleons and caravels sailed into the sunset to reach them from Mexico; and because of the unrivaled beauty of the sunsets the name ought to last—the Philippines, sunset land.



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