Whose nation? The illusion of national unity in the Philippines

As the Japanese Imperial Army advanced south of its empire in the late 1930s, Philippine Commonwealth President Manuel Quezon anticipated a range of reasons why war would be good for Filipinos. "War would 'teach our youth, reared in the ease and comfort of an American-protected market, how to suffer and how to die'. " In Quezon’s words, the Philippine archipelago was a unified nation. But was it really?

The illusion of a unified national consciousness is often little more than a specter. As the Japanese Imperial Army advanced south of its empire in the late 1930s, Philippine Commonwealth President Manuel Quezon anticipated a range of reasons why war would be good for Filipinos. "War would 'teach our youth, reared in the ease and comfort of an American-protected market, how to suffer and how to die'. " In Quezon’s words, the Philippine archipelago was a unified nation. But was it really?

The task of politically unifying the islands posed particular problems, as the archipelago experienced continuous violent upheaval. During the Pacific War, many inhabitants, despite their differing views on political, social and economic issues, took up arms and fought the Japanese forces. Yet, they were hardly motivated by a single Filipino national consciousness. Quezon’s words evoke a simple but important question: what and who exactly did he mean when he referred to the Philippine nation and its inhabitants?

National consciousness in the Philippines, as elsewhere across the globe, has often been taken for granted as something inherent to its territory - especially concerning the way in which the Pacific War is remembered. In general, the myth of a colonial experience having produced a mutual understanding between colonizers and colonized, while viewing the Japanese onslaught as a ‘watershed’ on this continuity, has simplified the war experience as a battle between heroic liberal democracies on one side and everything that defied this on the other. Henceforth, war memory in present-day politics and media often connects national identity to selected historical events, in which nation and nation-building are rendered as monolithic and uncomplicated entities, their identities left unchallenged.

Emblazoned within what Reynaldo Ileto has called the liberal Eurocentric view of a Philippine nation was perhaps less based on political inclusion than on social equality. On the contrary; their war memories focused on the social context of the peasantry was different from both the early twentieth century and the immediate post-war period. In many respects, the hopes and dreams of a privileged few. In many respects, the popular image of the Philippine nation was perhaps less based on political inclusion than on social equality.

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During the 1930s and the Pacific War, it is clear that many inhabitants of the Philippine archipelago harboured very different, if not opposing, views from those who were appointed to lead the archipelago through war. If one calls the cooperation between the peasant guerilla forces of central Luzon and the American-supported Philippine army a loyal commitment to the Philippines nation, one would overlook large parts of their individual motives to fight an external oppressor. The war did not bring physical alienation among these groups; it brought them closer while facing a common enemy. Yet, this was more out of necessity than out of sharing Quezon’s nationalistic feelings. After all, much of the organized resistance that mushroomed across the archipelago was caused by the brutality that accompanied Japanese military rule.

One can conclude that by looking at the social categories of class, gender or ethnicity, the islands were not part of a unified nation with one single narrative. Rather, the archipelago was home to a whole spectrum of narratives, each pushed, driven and motivated by different socio-economic or political conditions. A trans-war community, Philippine society remained divided and fragmented, and in it, there existed a number of images of the nation that contested, undermined and sometimes complemented each other. It might therefore be more accurate to speak of Philippine nationalism.

As for Quezon, he imagined his nation to be populated by those similar to himself culturally, politically, socially and religiously - he was referring to his own mirror image.

Notes

6. See for example Commonwealth Act no. 141 1956, sections 84 and Commonwealth Act no. 475 on the acquisition of citizenship.
8. Borkkot, op. cit. p.66

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