

Prof. Aquino remarks on Magellan's 'discovery'

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Special to Ka Leo

The following is excerpted from Aquino's speech, "From Columbus to Magellan," given at the "Rethinking Columbus and Cook" forum held Nov. 5. Aquino is a professor in the Department of Political Science and director of the Center for Philippine Studies, University of Hawaii at Manoa.

I've been asked to comment on the impact of the so-called "age of discovery" on Philippine society and culture, and by extension on the formation of Filipino communities outside of the Philippines such as Hawaii. Just as Christopher Columbus is noted in history books as having "discovered" the "New World" in 1492, Ferdinand Magellan is often referred to in our history books as having "discovered" the Philippines some 30 years later. It is particularly important for us supposedly "discovered" peoples in the Third or Fourth Worlds to rectify traditional scholarship on the coming of the

West to our native shores.

Let me give you a brief background on the conquest and annexation of the Philippines which remained a stagnant colony of Spain for more than 300 years. In his *Note to the Readers*, Spanish chronicler Antonio de Morga, who wrote *Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas*, said, "Once America, a fourth part of the globe, which was unknown to the ancients, was won, the Spanish discoverers sailed, following the sun, and they discovered in the Eastern Ocean, an archipelago composed of many islands adjacent to the Asian mainland, peopled by various nations, abundant in rich metals, precious stones and pearls, and all manner of fruits, on which lands they raised the Banner of Faith and redeemed them from the power of Evil and placed them under their obedience and rule; so that they can justly erect therein their peerless pillars and trophies which famous Hercules had left on the shores of the sea of Cadiz which later on the strong arm of

Charles the V, our Lord who bested him in grandiose deeds and enterprises, razed to the ground."

After the conquest of the City of Malacca, Ferdinand Magellan, a Portuguese explorer, transferred his services to the King of Spain, set sail for the Southern Seas, reaching the island of Samar and later Cebu where he was killed by the natives of Mactan. This was shortly after 1521. Forty years later, after various Spanish expeditions to the archipelago now named after King Philip II of Spain, Miguel Lopez de Legaspi effectively pacified the islands, creating in the process the primate city of Manila to be the center of conquest, consolidation, and conversion of the *Indios* (native population) to Christianity.

Jose Rizal, the Filipino national hero, best describes the Spanish era in the Philippines in *Noli Me Tangere* (variously translated as *Social Cancer* or *The Lost Eden*). Rizal wrote: "I have dared to answer the calum-

nies that have for centuries been heaped upon us and our country. I have written of the social condition and the life, of our beliefs, our hopes, our longings, our complaints, and our sorrows; I have unmasked the hypocrisy which, under the cloak of religion, has come among us to impoverish and to brutalize us. I have distinguished the true religion from the false, from the superstition that traffics with the holy word to get money and to make us believe in absurdities for which

of the Philippines



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Catholicism would blush, if ever it knew of them."

This was what the Age of Columbus had meant to people on the other side of the globe.

When the Philippine Revolution of 1896 put an end to one of the longest-running colonial periods in world history, the Filipinos thought they were free at last. They proclaimed the first independent republic in Asia in 1898. The Americans arrived unwelcome confusing the issue and robbing Filipinos of their hard-earned liberation



from the dark chambers of the Spanish Inquisition.

Time doesn't allow me to detail the negative effects of American imperialism on Philippine society but a few points are worth mentioning.

First, while introducing so-called "democracy," American colonial rule in the Philippines essentially continued the pattern of socioeconomic exploitation started by the Spaniards. The *Ilustrado* (educated) elite class, which willingly collaborated with the Spaniards, became the dominant class in politics and society.

Second, the Philippine economy under the Americans basically remained an agricultural exporter of raw materials. It is no wonder that when the Hawaii plantations needed contract labor to produce sugar in the early 1900s, the planters recruited Filipinos by the thousands as cheap labor.

Third, the Americans created the largest overseas military bases in the Philippines under the most onerous conditions masquerading as a "special relationship." Filipinos were treated like "little brown brothers" whose security and well-being were controlled by Uncle Sam or "big brother America." Even long after the Philippines gained its independence in 1946, the U.S. refused to leave. If it had not been for Mt. Pinatubo's eruption last July, the Americans would still

be in Clark Field. And if it hadn't been for the wisdom and courage of the Philippine Senate, Subic Bay would want to hang on for another decade!

Today in Hawaii, around 160,000 Filipinos constitute nearly 14 percent of the population. Most of them are in the services or lower-paying sectors of the economy. I don't doubt for a moment that they face institutional racism and discrimination in their work places. They don't have economic power. And consequently, they don't have political power.

By way of ending, let say that the age of discovery of the New World associated with Columbus led to a global expansion that in turn necessitated the exploitation of subject peoples caught in this web of historical upheaval. The conquered peoples became the "wretched of the earth," to borrow Fanon's famous phrase. We were made to learn English instead of local languages. Even the name of our country, *Philippines*, does not seem authentic as it is forever linked with King Philip of Spain. And the term *Filipinos* was used to refer to Spaniards born in the Philippines, as opposed to the *peninsulares*, or those born in Spain.

The time for rediscovery is long overdue. But sometimes you wonder if it will ever come at all. That is the downside of history. In many ways it is an incomplete or false history.