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Photographic Encounters in the Philippines, 1898 - 1910

At the end of the Spanish-American War, Spain ceded the Philippine Islands to the United States. The U.S. engaged in a three-year war against the Filipinos, who fought fiercely for their independence, and in 1902 it took possession of a country half a world away.

Melissa Banta

From photographs published in U.S. government surveys, anti-imperialist literature, newspapers, travel memoirs, and textbooks, a picture of the Philippines at the end of the 19th century began to emerge. Not a single view but a multiplicity of narratives. These images, assembled from varied contexts, reveal diverse perspectives of the Filipino-American encounter that took place over 100 years ago.

The early period of American-Filipino relations remains a relatively lost chapter in world history. "The undercurrents of imperialism and its consequences - identity and alienation, redemption and guilt, loyalty and betrayal," notes professor Terry Oggel, "[are] conflicts exacerbated by suppression, not only in the United States but in the Philippines, too." Recent scholarship, including *Vestiges of War: The Philippine-American War and the Aftermath of an Imperial Dream, 1899-1999*, edited by Angel Velasco Shaw and Luis H. Francia, and *White Love and Other Events in Filipino History* by Vicente Rafael, represent notable efforts to retrace and repossess this history.

"Two wounded insurgents in tent hospital on the First Reserve grounds, 1899".



The insightful *Displaying Filipinos* by Benito M. Vergara, Jr. explores, in particular, photography and its use in support of an imperial ideology. The objectifying, de-humanising quality of thousands upon thousands of mug-shot portraits of Filipinos taken in the early 1900s under the auspices of the U.S. Bureau of Science, for example, sur-

vive as jarring reminders of the colonial enterprise in which they were created. From these highly publicised pictures, Americans began to form an impression of the Philippines and develop a consciousness of the role of the U.S. as an occupying power.

At that time, despite the strident impe-

rial message, a raging public debate and wide-ranging views concerning the war and subsequent American occupation were also being expressed in words and pictures. The Philippine-American War, which began in 1898, was a brutal guerilla conflict that lasted over three years and resulted in over 6,000 U.S. casualties and the deaths of over 220,000 Filipino



"Negrito man, type 3, and Dean Worcester, showing relative size. Full length front view, 1900".

soldiers and civilians. At the time, opponents of U.S. military action included not only Filipinos, but also members of the American Anti-Imperialist League, African-Americans sympathetic to the cause of Filipino independence, and European observers. Photographs and political cartoons depicting the conflict figured in pro- and anti-war literature, newspapers, textbooks, and even fictional accounts that portrayed the campaign variously as a heroic military duty or a needless carnage.

Benevolent assimilation

President McKinley's doctrine of 'benevolent assimilation' - 'to educate the Filipinos, and uplift them and civilize and Christianize them' - provided the moral justification for the U.S.'s eventual annexation of the country. The first task, explained Howard Taft, then director of the Philippine Commission, would entail gathering data of the 'social and industrial conditions of the people, as the basis for intelligent legislative action.' Dean Worcester, Secretary of the Interior for the Philippines from 1901 to 1913, took nearly 5,000 photographs (with the assistance of photographers and other anthropologists) on surveys sponsored by the U.S. Bureau



"Moro boy, type 1. Son of Datu Batarasa, with Governor E. Y. Miller, 1905".



"Bontoc Igorots in automobile, 1904".



"Bontoc Igorot entering service, 1901".



"After a year's service, 1902".



"After two years service. 1903".

All photographs courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard Museum. Please note that for historical accuracy, all photograph captions are reproduced as they originally appeared.

of Science. A professor of zoology at the University of Michigan, Worcester was well versed in the process of scientific data gathering. In makeshift field studios, he photographed and classified hundreds of unnamed Filipinos according to evolutionary ideas of the day, ranking them on a hierarchical scale from savage to civilised.

Series of before-and-after shots of Filipinos transformed 'from their nakedness and headhunting into constabulary uniforms and baseball' served as documentary proof of 'successful' American reforms. Worcester's photographs and anthropological findings, which appeared in the extensive publications of the Philippine Commission and in histories written by Worcester, played a persuasive role in supporting U.S. policies ranging from economic development to the question of Filipino independence. Images taken by Worcester and others on government surveys later appeared in magazines (including *National Geographic*) and newspapers. "The average American knew almost nothing about [the Philippines]," a travel writer wrote in 1907, "until the newspapers and magazines began to educate him."

At the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904, where over 1,000 Filipinos (including Negritos, Igorots, Moros, and Visayans) were showcased in a recreated village situated on a 47-acre site, fairgoers could see government photographs exhibited as well as purchase illustrated guidebooks. Over time, however, these widely published portrayals earned Worcester the distrust of both Filipinos and a growing number of Americans. "Ask the average man on an American street what his impression of the Filipinos is and he will describe the naked dog-eating Igorote," the *New York Evening Post* reported in 1913. "The man responsible for the inaccurate conception is Dean C. Worcester."

Personal accounts and political views

In addition to government-sponsored



"Tagalog man, cleaning a hardwood floor, 1900".

venues, an extensive body of literature about the islands was being produced. Among these accounts, which were often illustrated with photographs, were political pieces, travel memoirs, as well as novels written by Western travellers, teachers, missionaries, and diplomats and their wives. Often illustrated with photographs, each publica-

tion expressed its own nuanced view of American imperialism.

Images in personal albums of U.S. administrators also fill out the picture of early American occupation by revealing a rare and intimate view into colonial life experienced by government officials and their families living on the islands.



Invaders and Resisters, acrylic on paper, 1980, by Ben Cabrera. Courtesy of the artist.

Snapshots of polo games, country club galas, Filipino servants, and children with Filipino nannies offer a striking contrast to the stark government photographic records. Another view of the Filipinos emerges in photographs of the intellectual and professional class, many of whom were prominent Philippine civic and business leaders. These

highly stylised images, taken in elaborate studios in Manila, reveal the manner in which the Filipino elite chose to represent themselves.

In recent years, a number of contemporary Filipino artists have returned to images created during the American occupation. Through a variety of inventive approaches, they have appropriated historic photographs into their work as a means of understanding the past and exploring their national identity. Historic photographs continue to illuminate the broader complexities of the American-Filipino relationship, and examination of the varied uses of the medium over time reveal the dynamic and shifting intersection of anthropology, politics and public perception. ◀

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"Two professional Moro dancing girls, 1901".



"Blas Villamor and his wife, 1906".