



*the* PROMISE *of the* FOREIGN

NATIONALISM *and the* TECHNICS  
*of* TRANSLATION *in the* SPANISH  
PHILIPPINES Vicente L. Rafael

## **THE PROMISE OF THE FOREIGN**



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*Vicente L. Rafael*

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*For Leila, Carlos, and Aliaha*



*To redeem in his own tongue that pure language exiled in  
the foreign tongue, to liberate by transposing this pure language  
captive in the work, such is the task of the translator.*

WALTER BENJAMIN

*Each time I open my mouth, each time I speak or write,  
I promise. Whether I like it or not. This promise heralds the  
uniqueness of a language yet to come. It . . . precedes all language,  
summons all speech and already belongs to each language as it  
does to all speech. . . . It is not possible to speak outside of this  
promise that gives a language, the uniqueness of the idiom,  
but only by promising to give it.*

JACQUES DERRIDA





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## PREFACE

“Forgetting, and I would even go so far as to say historical error, forms an essential factor in the creation of a nation,” writes Ernest Renan in his classic essay “*Que’est-ce qu’une nation?*” (1882). Indeed, “the essence of a nation,” he says in a much-cited passage, “is that all of its individual members should have many things in common; and also that all of them should have forgotten many things. . . . Every French citizen ought to have already forgotten St. Bartholomew, and the massacres of the Midi in the thirteenth century.”<sup>1</sup> This imperative to cultivate a shared amnesia has to do with the fact that every nation is founded on violence borne by political and cultural differences. Constitutionally hybrid, nations are made up of peoples with divergent ethnic, racial, religious, economic, and linguistic origins. To arrive at what Renan calls a “fusion” necessary for nationhood, such differences must be set aside. Overcoming them allows for assimilation into a new community. Such overcoming requires forgetting one’s origins. “It is good for all to know how to forget,” he writes.<sup>2</sup> In place of a heterogenous and conflict-ridden past, one takes on a common legacy that marks out a shared destiny.

What does this common legacy—what Renan calls the “spiritual principle” that animates nations—consist of? It has to do with inheritance and commemoration. Renan argues that the nation’s “soul” resides in the sacrifices of those who have suffered and died for its sake. Such sacrificial deaths call out to the living, whose responsibility is to mourn those who have passed on.<sup>3</sup> Mourning means caring for this inheritance of death. By commemorating the suffering of the dead, we, whoever we are, recall not their individual lives in all their contingency and particularity, but the cumulative effect of their end. In this way, we come to regard them as ancestors whose deaths form a collective gift. Reconceptualizing death as a gift makes possible the emergence and survival of the nation. The calculated and ritualized act of forgetting thus produces a new genealogy. Mourning the dead, which is to say, remembering to



forget them, we lay claim to what Renan calls their “glory.” We pass on their, and our, passing on to future generations.<sup>4</sup>

If Renan is right—that the forgetting of origins comprises the essence of nationhood—such a task entails two things: substitution and estrangement. From the recent scholarship on nationalism, we learn that in fact the real origins of the nation lie outside of the national. These include but are not limited to the violent and revolutionary breakup of dynastic, religious, and colonial orders; the expansion of capitalist markets in general and print capitalism in particular; the rise of new technologies of transportation and communication; the vernacularization of languages of power; the spread of the serial, mechanical temporality of clock and calendar alongside modern modes of publicity such as newspapers and novels producing new publics populated by emergent social types; and the compulsion, especially among emergent elites, to comparative thinking.<sup>5</sup> Such historical events comprise the leading features of modernity and furnished the conditions of possibility for the rise of the nation-form. These developments, as uneven as they were overdetermined, were global in scope and therefore beyond and before the national. They make up a kind of historical excess of which the nation is but an effect. While they properly belong to the study of the formation of nations, there is nothing about them that is proper or native to the nation as such.

In Renan, however, we see how the historical and technical conditions for nationhood are humanized and domesticated. The notion of sacrifice—of death as a gift to the living that creates among them a filial bond—comes to substitute for all those forces that came before and continue to come beyond the nation. Nationalist discourses replace the violent heterogeneity of the historical and the nonhuman agency of the technological with unifying narratives about “our glorious past,” and “our obligations to the future.” Meant to spur assimilation and set the moral terms of community, such narratives set differences aside. They thus estrange the nation’s origins, which, to begin with, are not national at all. The call to mourn the dead is an oblique acknowledgment that the nation is founded on what it cannot comprehend, much less incorporate. But it is also a means for disavowing this fact. Put differently, the substitution of the “sacrificial dead” for the intractable complications of history and technology is a way of remembering to forget the essential strangeness of national origins. One kind of alien presence, imagined as innocent and beneficial, comes to stand in the place of another that,

while not exactly malevolent, produces effects that are contradictory, unpredictable, at times destructive, and at others emancipatory. What comes to be regarded as a guarantor of goodness and legitimacy is exchanged for that which works in the world as a principle of equivocation and a force of ambivalence.<sup>6</sup>

Nationalism, or the conjuring of the nation by way of substitution and estrangement, is the topic of this book. To that double process of appropriating and replacing what is foreign while keeping its foreignness in view I give the name *translation*. Nationalism understood as translation revises (in the strong sense of that word) origins for the sake of projecting a new basis of filiation. At the same time, it keeps in reserve something of the alien quality of origins, investing it with a power to explain the past and underwrite the coming of a future.

This book examines the beginnings of Filipino nationalism in the later nineteenth century until the eve of the revolution of 1896. It argues that early Filipino nationalism has its roots in the dual history of Spanish colonialism and Catholic conversion, and that it sought to account for its contradictory origins by means of translation. It sought, that is, to appropriate an aspect of the Catholic-colonial regime and invest it with a power it did not originally have. In this historical context, I focus on Castilian, the language of the colonizer, which captivated the thinking of Filipino nationalists.<sup>7</sup> The latter saw in Castilian a force of communication with which to address those on top of the colonial hierarchy, all the way to the metropole. Often to their surprise, they received all sorts of responses, though not always what they had hoped for. Castilian also allowed them to communicate among themselves, thereby enabling them to go beyond their linguistic and geographical differences. It gave them a medium with which to leave, even if only momentarily, their origins behind and identify with the coming of an alternative, pre- as well as postcolonial history.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, when incorporated into vernacular literature, Castilian had a transformative effect, extending and amplifying the literature's communicative capacity and arguably laying the ground for the formation of a nationalist public sphere. The "Castilianization" of the vernacular—that is, the estrangement of the latter through its assimilation of the former—would characterize vernacular theater, the earliest form of mass entertainment in the colony, and would provide a point of convergence between elite and mass interests in the power they sensed was at work in Castilian.

Such developments were borne by a pervasive nationalist fantasy:

that of harnessing Castilian into a *lingua franca* with which to dispel the oppressive parochialism and social inequalities in the colony. Castilian, or more precisely the communicative power associated with it, would, or so nationalists thought, promote the assimilation of the colony's disparate peoples as full citizens of Spain, and when that project failed, as citizens of a new and independent Filipino nation. In this way did Castilian function as a technic for overcoming what nationalists could not fully account for: the ineradicable contingency of their differences and the contradictions of colonial society. In short, the foreignness of Castilian, the fact that it was a second language, enhanced Castilian's telecommunicative reach. Discovering a recurring foreignness within their "own" language and society, mass audiences and actors in vernacular plays, nationalist elites in exile, and, later on, revolutionary fighters in the colony sought in varying ways to appropriate it. Doing so meant tapping into previously inaccessible and secret sources of power that lay beyond the threshold of colonial society. Feeling the pressure of this power, nationalists saw in it the promise of nationhood, but also a recurring menace to its realization.

In what follows, I trace the genesis of this promise, the Filipino and Spanish responses to its call, and the progress and ramifications of its betrayal. What I hope comes forth in the chapters that follow is the jagged history of a specific instance of a much more general process: the emergence of a nation tied to the vicissitudes of translation practices rooted in colonization and Christian evangelization. This other legacy—the persistent need to translate, and the risks and opportunities it entailed—renders the nation's borders constantly open to the coming of something alien and other than itself. In the Philippine case, the experience of nationhood was—and arguably continues to be—inseparable from the hosting of a foreign presence to which one invariably finds oneself held hostage. The paradoxical nature of Filipino nationhood is perhaps characteristic of many other nations, especially those that were formerly colonized. But the exhilaration and the particular tragedy of its unfolding would come in time to belong to Filipinos alone, as would the names of the dead and their ghostly emanations.

## INTRODUCTION

## FORGIVING THE FOREIGN

“Above all,” Philippine Commonwealth President Manuel L. Quezon declared in a 1937 speech to the Filipino people, “we owe to Spain . . . the foundations of our national unity.”<sup>1</sup> Spanish conquest and the conversion of most of the native population to Catholicism transformed the archipelago from a collection of disparate and often warring communities into a “compact and solid nation, with its own history, its heroes, its martyrs, and its own flag, [with] its own personality, feeling a deep sense of worth and inspired by a vision of its great destiny.” For this reason, Quezon claims, Filipinos ought to overlook the “mistakes” of their former colonial master. Instead, they should “raise in every heart . . . a monument of undying gratitude to the memory of Spain side by side with that which we should erect in honor of the American people.” Speaking thirty-nine years after the collapse of Spanish rule and the onset of United States colonial occupation, Quezon (who had himself fought briefly in the revolution of 1896) stressed Filipino indebtedness to Spain. The “religion and education” the latter provided “had not only enabled us to assimilate another civilization such as brought about by the United States of America, but also prevented the basic and distinctive elements of our personality from being carried away by strange currents, thus bringing us to the triumph of our aspiration to be an independent nation.”<sup>2</sup>

So immense is the debt owed to Spain that it cancels out whatever Spaniards might owe to Filipinos. Spain’s “mistakes,” Quezon points out, were “merely crimes of the times and not of Spain.” By this logic, colonial oppression must be written off like a bad debt, impossible to collect, much less account for. In the face of these circumstances, Filipinos should forgive their former colonial master even and especially if the latter had not asked to be pardoned. Thus Filipinos on the threshold of receiving a grant of independence from one colonial power, the United States, inherit a double obligation to an earlier one. They must

not only be grateful, they must also be forgiving. One requires the other. Forgiveness is conjoined with the call to “raise in every Filipino heart . . . a monument of undying gratitude” to the former master. Continually recollecting a debt they can never fully repay as well as forgiving one who has never asked for pardon, Filipinos remain forever bound to the legacy of the former master just as they anticipate doing the same for their current occupier. We might ask: what is the nature of this legacy?

Colonialism lies at the origins of nationhood, Quezon suggests. In this he is not alone, as some of the most significant works in the historiography of Filipino nationalism testify to this same claim, though with important qualifications and varying emphasis.<sup>3</sup> It was the Spanish legacy to transform disparate peoples into a nation capable of “assimilating” yet another civilization. Issuing from an alien presence, nationhood in this view is the condition of being endowed with the power to incorporate that which lies outside the nation, and to do so without any loss. Absorbing the influences of an other, the nation retains its integrity. The “basic and distinct elements of our personality,” as Quezon puts it, do not change. They cannot be “carried away by strange currents.” In his view, the nation absorbs outside forces without itself becoming different. It gives in without giving up what it essentially is. This magical capacity to remain immune to that which comes from the elsewhere, to harbor and domesticate the foreign, including the foreignness of its own origins, while remaining unaltered: such is Spain’s grant to the Philippines. Continuing indefinitely into the future, this colonial gift leads to “independence,” which thereby calls for the forgiveness of those who have not even asked for it.

It is not surprising that Quezon by 1937 had come to hold what would seem like a deeply conservative view of nationhood as a gift from above that holds its recipients in eternal debt to its source. As president of the American-sanctioned commonwealth—a transitional regime meant to prepare Filipinos for political independence—Quezon, along with the great majority of the Filipino elite who filled the ranks of the colonial legislature and bureaucracy, stood as the direct beneficiary of the U.S. occupation. American power was used not only to crush the incipient Philippine Republic of 1899 and the fierce Filipino resistance that lasted through part of the first decade of U.S. rule. It was also crucial to preserving and expanding elite privileges through the colonial legislature, the judicial system, free trade policies, and the military, which repelled local revolts and other challenges from within. Even as they occasionally

railed against American hegemony, Filipino elites thrived under its protection. Heirs to the administrative machinery and political-economic infrastructure that emerged during the later period of Spanish rule and was subsequently overhauled under the Americans, Filipino elites like Quezon no doubt sought to legitimize their place by evoking the fatedness of their historical role as the very embodiment of nationalist sentiment. One way of doing so was to claim for the nation-state a kind of natural descent from its colonial forebears. As an example of what Benedict Anderson has called “official nationalism,” Quezon’s speech is perhaps just another anxious attempt to explain away the bastard origins of the nation while securing his position as its legitimate leader.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps.

What is curious about Quezon’s speech is its triumphal tone. It is as if the monumentalization of Filipino gratitude to Spain and to the United States indicates not an admission of defeat but a victory of sorts: that of preserving the “basic and distinctive elements of our personality,” keeping these from “being carried away by strange currents.” Using the foreign, Filipinos are able to withstand its full force. Here, there is a kind of inoculation at work, one with a history that dates back to the beginnings of Spanish rule in the second half of the sixteenth century. Resorting to local languages to convert the native populace to Christianity, working through local elites to collect tribute and enforce colonial edicts, relying upon native and Chinese labor to build ships, roads, and churches while deploying native armies to repel other European powers and repress local uprisings, the Spanish regime like all other colonial orders, required what it sought to subdue. It confronted and challenged forth what was alien to itself, seeking to transform it into a standing reserve. Hence conquest required the natives’ conversion, not only to Christianity, but into a stock of labor, materials, and signs that could be readily called upon to augment and expand colonialism’s reach. From translation to taxation, from military incursions to residential resettlement, from religious conversion to the exile and execution of “subversives,” Spanish colonial power was sustained by the material and symbolic resources at times willingly, but more often coercively extracted from those it subjugated and subjectified.<sup>5</sup>

As a witness to this history, Quezon seems to be saying that something survived and persisted in the face of Spanish (and later, American) exactions and demands. Not all was “carried away by strange currents.” On the one hand, the nation is the result of a kind of inheritance. It is

constituted by the legacy of colonial incursions and institutions. On the other hand, the nation is also a site of survival, a living on that comes from taking the foreign in and remaking it into an element of oneself. Thus is the nation indebted to colonialism. Thanks to its exposure to the foreign, it has developed a powerful immunity to further alien assaults.

There is then another way of understanding Quezon's assertion of Filipinos' dual obligation to forgive while remembering Spain. It is tempting to regard the call to forgiveness as a recipe for officially administered amnesia and it undoubtedly was meant to have this effect. But to pardon those who have not asked for it is also to display magnanimity. Alongside "undying gratitude," there is a kind of unyielding generosity. The servant appropriates from the master something that the latter had not intended to give: the power to absorb that which is foreign while inoculating itself from its deracinating effects. The servant acknowledges this unintended gift. He thus shows that he is capable of something the master is not: that of recognizing his debts. Spain for its part is unable to reckon what it owes to the Philippines. It remains ignorant of its obligations. Filipinos respond by overlooking the Spanish inability to owe up to its "mistakes" and "crimes." By this act of forgiveness, Filipinos thereby reinforce their difference from the former master. They set themselves apart by recognizing what Spain cannot see in addition to granting the former master what it does not even think to ask for. Filipinos thereby reciprocate the unintended gift of Spain, this time augmented by a constant remembering. Headed toward the "triumph of our aspiration to be an independent nation," Filipinos acknowledge the ineluctably foreign origins of the nation, converting this foreignness from a sign of shame into a signal of impending sovereignty. Put differently, they regard colonialism as that which brings with it the promise of the foreign. This promise is felt as the coming of a power with which to absorb and domesticate the otherness that lies at the foundation of the nation.

This book inquires into the promise of the foreign—the wishfulness it induced, the betrayals it sowed, the vengeance it called forth—at the origins of Filipino nationalism during the latter half of the nineteenth century. How was nationalism infused with that which it desired, yet at times sought to disown, and whose arrival was always deferred? How did it emerge through the mediation of what was as irreducibly alien as it was undeniably intimate? And what of this mediation? Is it possible to think of the foreign in its various manifestations—for example, as lan-

guage, money, “subversives,” rumors, secret oaths, and ghosts, which all figure in the chapters that follow—as the medium for translating and transmitting those “strange currents” that at once enabled and menaced the coherence of nationalist thought? If the foreign can be regarded as a medium for forging nationalism, could we not regard it then as a kind of technology? Could we not think of the foreign languages, dress, ideas, and machineries that increasingly penetrated and permeated colonial society throughout the nineteenth century as infrastructures with which to extend one’s reach while simultaneously bringing distant others up close? Expanding while contracting the world, transporting and communicating the inside outside and vice versa, exporting goods and people while importing capital, books, newspapers, political movements, secret societies, and ideologies, technological developments in the later period of Spanish rule brought the promise of the colony’s transformation. They circulated the expectation of society becoming other than what it had been, becoming, that is, modern in its proximity to events in the metropole and the rest of the “civilized” world. In this way, the complex of technological developments, we might say, embodied the promise of the foreign, or more precisely, of the becoming foreign associated with the experience of modernity.<sup>6</sup>

To understand the link between foreignness and modernity, it is necessary to sketch some of the salient features of the Philippines’ long nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> By the 1820s, a number of important areas in the colony had undergone fundamental changes, moving from a subsistence economy to one geared toward the cultivation of cash crops for export to world markets. It is worth underlining that the Spanish colonial state did little to spur these developments. Rather, it sought to contain the effects of foreign commerce and the circulation of foreign capital through protectionist measures and regressive taxation, while censoring new ideas and sentiments that entered the colony from outside.

From 1565 to 1815 (or from the Battle of Lepanto to Waterloo, as the historian Benito Legarda reminds us),<sup>8</sup> the galleon trade served as the sole link between the colony and the rest of the Spanish empire. While it prevailed, Manila served mainly as a transshipment point for Asian goods made or gathered outside the colony in exchange for New World silver half a world away. Erratic and vulnerable to seasonal changes and piracy, the highly speculative trade was limited to Spanish residents while dependent on native shipbuilders and sailors as well as on Chi-



nese traders. It mired the colonial state in constant fiscal insolvency, making it dependent on silver subsidies from New Spain. The Philippine colony thus remained an economic backwater, with neither precious metals, big plantations, nor manufacturing industries to attract large-scale Spanish settlements. Bourbon reforms from the 1760s sought to turn the colony's fortunes around by encouraging direct trade between the colony and Spain (thereby bypassing the Americas) and mandating the cultivation of tobacco as a cash crop in certain parts of the largest island, Luzon. The state-run tobacco monopoly was as close as the Philippines came to a system of forced deliveries characteristic of other Southeast Asian colonies. Prone to corruption, smuggling, and the intermittent eruption of local revolts, the tobacco monopoly was never profitable. Abolished in 1882, it showed once again the Spanish inability to reap benefits from the colony's agricultural resources. Nonetheless, the tobacco monopoly, unlike the galleon trade, had the effect of inaugurating an era of economic transformation by making conceivable crop production for export rather than for domestic use.

Spanish attempts at controlling the rate and modulating the tempo of change within the Philippine colony consistently failed due in large part to political turmoil in the Peninsula. Throughout the nineteenth century, Spain was immersed in ongoing civil wars pitting liberals against conservatives. In the wake of Napoléon's invasion and the loss of its American empire, the Spanish metropole's ability to direct the course of events in its Philippine colony was considerably circumscribed. The Carlist wars and the revolution of 1868 further intensified the pace of political instability in Spain, as conservative promonarchists vied for power with liberal republicans. Given the rapid changes of regimes at home, colonial officials appointed by the government in Madrid came and went with increasing frequency in the Philippines. Unsure of the length of their tenure, such officials often turned their positions into opportunities for amassing wealth. Given the rampant bureaucratic predisposition toward rent seeking, corruption became common at all levels of the state. Contradictory Spanish policies aggravated the conditions in the colony. For example, the government sought to liberalize trade by opening the colony's ports to foreign, mostly British and American, merchants. At the same time, they sought to pursue protectionist measures, limiting the flow of goods from other countries and slapping steep tariffs on them. Such measures, not surprisingly, were invitations for bribery and smuggling, further enriching those in the position to

benefit from imposing, then circumventing, the law. In the same vein, Spanish policies for encouraging the growth of crops for export failed to benefit Spaniards themselves, for they had neither the capital, nor the interest, nor the knowledge to operate large-scale plantations. Always small in number (less than 1 percent of the colony's population by 1898), the Spanish community tended to reside within Manila's walls—medieval-like fortifications referred to as *Intramuros*, literally “within walls.” They were dissuaded by the government from venturing into the countryside for fear of mixing with the native populace and giving rise to a restive mestizo population that might, as in the case of the Americas, come to challenge colonial rule. Most were thus consigned, if not content, to live off government salaries or subsidies, and in the case of the clergy, from tributes rendered by parishioners, rents collected from their estates, and funds from the Crown.<sup>9</sup>

In the absence of Spanish investments, foreign merchants stepped in. As early as the later eighteenth century, British and North American traders had been making regular stops in Manila en route to China. By the early nineteenth century, they had established flourishing merchant houses in the colony. Run by enterprising men, often with experience and connections to European and American trading houses in Canton, they set about advancing credit to local farmers who then promised to grow and sell them certain crops at a set price delivered according to a set schedule. Such crops as abaca, sugar, coffee, and tobacco proved highly profitable. Working through networks of Chinese wholesalers and retailers with long-standing ties to the countryside—in many cases having intermarried with local women—British and American merchants provided the inducements and rewards for surplus production that the Spaniards could not. They also made available new technologies for the processing of raw materials and in 1892 furnished the capital for building the colony's first railroad system that linked Manila to central and northern Luzon, leading to the increase in the production of crops and migration of labor.<sup>10</sup> Foreign merchant houses also took in deposits and paid out interest, thereby providing the colony with modern banking services. Along with Chinese traders who were also local sources of credit for those who could not access Manila's banks, foreign merchant houses allowed for the accumulation and circulation of capital within the colony. Where Spaniards at the end of the Galleon trade settled for using the state apparatus to collect rents and extract labor and natural resources without providing necessary capital investments, foreigners