

A HARSH LAND: AN INTREPID PEOPLE

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You have my brief paper with you. I do not propose to read it but rather talk more or less on the same line, and perhaps, supplement the information one way or another.

When it is all told by some great historian, the real story of the Ilocano Movement, I am certain, will be a saga of electrifying epic magnitude, packed with the drama of failures and successes, tears and laughter. A succession of individuals of sterling character will march up and down the stage, as will lesser figures, and obscure groups in the background.

Right now the real story lies buried in the Church records, dusty and crumbling with age and the tropical clime. The story is hidden in family albums and ancient trunks, awaiting disclosure in oral tradition. For instance, I know from fondly remembered snatches of conversation when my father was still alive in the 1930's that my grandfather originally came from Ilocos Sur.

The Ilocano Movement was in full swing at the time of the arrival of the Spaniards in the 16th century, and for how long before then who knows?

It must have been dictated by instinct, influenced by necessity, and certainly had no conscious planning. It had no leadership – no system, as a scholar like Dr. Sicat is. I'm equally certain it had no funds, otherwise, it would not have been an Ilocano Movement. But it went on – slowly, steadily, like the quiet plodding of a typical Ilocano carabao. And it goes on today, as before.

Artifacts abound – mute witnesses to the great Ilocano Odyssey: Ilocano-type houses; farms carved out of virgin forests *narriba a taltalon*; tools and implements; ornamentals fashioned by hand and attesting to skills brought along by the first migrants.

In fact, Ilocanos brought along their culture wherever they went. Quite often they were not assimilated; on the contrary, they

may have completely Ilocanized – economically, socially and politically – the communities where they settled. This is as true of Cagayan as of Mindoro.

Typical must be the migration pattern in Outer Ilocandia suggested by the slow-plodding bulcarts come down from the North, laden with vinegar and tuba and perhaps handicrafts, bearing prospective migrants who would sell their goods, take part in the harvesting of palay, and quite often intermarry in the new locality and stay for good. In this manner, the Ilocanos are found all over – *kasla inwaris nga it-ta*.

And the migrants are a race of achievers, displaying the same qualities inherited from their forebears: thrift, sturdiness, industry. Around these core traits are a cluster of others – incorruptibility; forbearance in adversity; fidelity to one's family for better or for worse; religiosity.

Aren't these the qualities that define the character of the Fonaciers, Aglipay, Isabelo delos Reyes, S.P. Lopez, Camilo Csias, Quintin Paredes, General Paulino Santos, Quirino, Marcos, Soliven? And in our generation – Franz Arcellana, Leopoldo Yabes, Froilan Bacungan, Alejandro Hufana, Romy Tadena? The Dumlaos, Fidel Ramos, General Ver?

The Ilocanos are the Yankees of the Philippines. The only other mobile Filipinos are the Cebuanos, who predominate in Northern Mindanao.

But Cebuanos cannot compare with the Ilocanos in scale and massiveness of population dispersion among other cultural communities.

The colonizing influence of the Ilocano Movement may be inferred from the fact that as an Ilocano, one can transact business, or fight, or make love in the Ilocano language in such far-flung places as Davao City, or Cotabato, or Mindoro.

The main explanation of the Ilocano Movement is the density of the population and the harshness of the land in the Ilocos. This density of population goes back to the pre-Spanish times. The great Spanish Conquistador Salcedo tells us of barangays with population of 8,000 to 10,000 in the Ilocos Region, which he conquered, compared with *rancherias* of 50 to 100 elsewhere in the Archipelago which he had traveled.

By the way, the same density of population makes for equitable distribution of land and wealth in the Ilocos. There you will find no problem of agrarian reform; no dissidence on the scale of Central Luzon or Lanao or Zamboanga.

But nowhere is agriculture more intensive. By force of circumstances which transformed necessity into habit and tradition, the Ilocanos are vegetable lovers. They also eat delicacies that you would not touch, such as field rats, locusts, *abal-abal* (*salagubang* fried with vinegar), *itlog ti aboos* (pop-rice-like eggs or red ants), *banyat* (lizards) and their eggs. One goat is a complete feast: roast hump, *caldereta* (stew), *papaitan* (bile and innards).

Because of clannishness and fidelity to the old country, land values in the Ilocos are artificially high even today. Old timers in Hawaii and the West Coast also do not know any other form of safe investment than land. They may lose their white wives (the theme of most novels written in Ilocano by Ilocanos in Hawaii), but *saan nga mapukaw ti daga* — land you buy is yours forever. You can read this in the novel "Narabraham nga Pagaraban" (Green Pasture).

I have two major conclusions and these are: first, that the Ilocanos have made an important contribution to the socio-economic development of the Philippines. This is equally true of Ilocanos abroad, who make regular remittances of foreign currency to their folks back home. Quite a number of them come home to retire on dollar pensions; and surely, this is a form of invisible income entering our economy. Second, that because of their number and the wide geographical spread of their migration, which is co-extensive with the territory of the Philippines, they must make for political stability of this country.

However one travels to the national homeland of the Ilocanos — whether by land, by sea, or by air — one cannot avoid noting the sharp contrasts between what he has seen along the way and what he has arrived into. Geographers have fittingly described the Ilocanos Coastal Plain as a geographical region distinct from the rest of Luzon.

The vast expanses of fields in Central Luzon narrow into patches of rugged terrain as one enters Ilocandia. From the sea, there are startling contrasts between the natural seaports of Bataan, Zambales, and Pangasinan and an absence of good seaports along the coast of the region. From the air, one sees at once how closely the hills and mountains are pressed towards the sea, leaving only an irregular and narrow strip of land for cultivation.

The whole of traditional Ilocandia is squeezed between the China Sea on the West and the mountain ranges of the Central Cordillera on the east. In all, the whole region constitutes 11,446 square kilometers of the national territory. And it stretches north to south for approximately 250 kilometers along the coast. What is forbidding about the terrain is paralleled by less than clement

weather. For over half the whole year, from November to May, the sun beats mercilessly down on the already parched ground, sustaining in many places only brush and cogon and an occasional solitary tree. The Ilocos Coastal Plain holds the distinction of having the shortest rainy season among the various regions of the country, and yet it is not spared the full fury of the devastating typhoons that visit the country annually. The rivers are generally short. By during the rainy season, they are swift and destructive; during the long dry season, they are shallow and sluggish. And the combination of inadequate water resources and hilly terrain makes for a soil of poor quality.

It is harsh and forbidding country, and it has been on this anvil of adversity that the Ilocano has minted and honed his fabled virtues and skills. He learned to farm the land. He plumbed the sea for whatever it could yield. He learned a host of native crafts and trades. And because the returns were meager, he made frugality and practicality extensions of his personality.

Oddly enough, this forbidding setting became the hive of a dense and thriving population, particularly so during the Spanish era when the region was opened to the venues of commerce and contact. Partly because of the limited area for cultivation and the relatively large population, Ilocandia has pressed outwards from the coastal plain toward the neighboring provinces, and toward the other islands of the archipelago. And it is now customary to speak of an "inner Ilocandia" — denoting the traditional Ilocos provinces on the plain — and "outer Ilocandia", comprising the neighboring provinces of Isabela, Cagayan, Nueva Vizcaya, Tarlac, and Benguet, wherein after waves of migrations the Ilocanos have become the predominant part of the population.

Traditional Ilocandia comprises the coastal provinces of La Union, Ilocos Sur, and Ilocos Norte, and the landlocked province of Abra. Abra, nestling in broken valleys between two enclosing mountain ranges, has a land area of 3,975 square kilometers, a population of 145,508 (according to the latest official count, the 1970 census), and a density of 37 persons per square kilometer. Ilocos Norte is a compact area of 3,399 square kilometers, with a population of 343,427 and a density of 101. Ilocos Sur, an elongated territory of 2,579 square kilometers has a population of 385,139 and a density of 149. La Union — a "union" of several towns carved out of Ilocos Sur and Pangasinan to form a new province — with an area of 1,493 square kilometers and a population of 373,682, is the most densely populated province of the region, with 250 persons per square kilometer.

The Ilocano population outside the heartland is even larger. The 1970 census indicates a total population of 1,247,756 in the main Ilocos provinces; elsewhere in the country there are 2,902,840 Ilocanos. Today Ilocanos predominate in the provinces of Isabela where they represent 76.3 percent of the total population; Cagayan has 395,301 Ilocanos (68%); Tarlac, 281,641 (50.3%); Nueva Vizcaya, 169,502 (76.3%); and Benguet, 77,709 (29.4%).

Moreover, Ilocanos are the second most populous ethnic group in the province of Pangasinan. In a few generations, some proximate provinces namely, Pangasinan and Nueva Ecija, may well become assimilated as parts of an expanding Outer Ilocandia.

Some Ilocanos also reside today in substantial numbers in Cotabato – now split into North Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat, and Maguindanao (109,002) – South Cotabato (39,361), Quezon (35,211), Davao del Norte (16,499), Davao del Sur (14,069), Oriental Mindoro (11,289), Pampanga (10,426), Palawan (103,08), Ifugao (8,403), and Mountain Province (4,521).

By the 1970 census, Ilocanos accounted for 14 percent of the total population of the country, making them the third largest ethnic group next to the Tagalogs and Cebuanos.

The great Ilocano movement also swamped the government resettlement sites. The Ilocanos were among the early pioneers in Koronadal and Arakan, Cotabato, in the frontier region south of Malaybalay, Bukidnon, and in the unexplored parts of Palawan. They were the homesteaders of the country's last frontiers.

Nor did the movement stop at the water's edge. It led Ilocanos overseas. They sailed in trickles as boxers, barbers, or musicians, all over Southeast Asia, Hongkong, and Japan; or joined in the exodus as workers for the pineapple plantations of Hawaii, the orchards and truckgardens of the West Coast of the United States, and the salmon canneries of Oregon and Alaska. They even joined the U.S. navy to "see the world."

But it was not a case of simply leaving home and taking roots elsewhere. For the Ilocano lived as it were the old country. He brought with him his customs and his ways, his trade and his crafts, his language, and most of all he brought his spartan lifestyle. And since they moved in numbers, in time it was they who, as it were, assimilated the destinations of their journeys – the places where they now made their living and their home. Some would become cosmopolitanized, yes, but that too was part of the whole ethic – the drive toward success in life.

The migrant Ilocano, the expatriate abroad, and the one who remained on the plain, did not become in the end distinct com-

munities and cultures. Each in his own way expressed the same determination and capacity for effort. With them the cake of custom and tradition, the common language, abide. And they would share even in their separations common memories of the old country, the same old land of the Ilocos, cherished no doubt all the more for what it had exacted of brawn and sacrifice from countless generations of Ilocanos.

It is a phenomenon which may have been described as "clannishness". It is probably better described as a sense of community and an attitude toward life, strong because it is deeply rooted in tradition.

COMMENTS IFOR SOLIDUM

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In a sense, Dr. Fernandez's piece may be viewed as it were of a cultural community whose traditional homeland is Region I, but whose ethnic members are all over the country. Region I belongs to the second category of regions, that is, regions with minimal development. In spite of the harshness of the land the anvil of adversity produce an intrepid people. What has been the effect of intrepidity of the Ilocanos on the rate of development of the Region? It has been observed that generally, migrants are more enterprising and intrepid than the regional population. Has migration therefore, and with it the drain of intrepidity not been a negative factor to the Region?

Fernandez: I think that this Ilocano trait will be there for generations to come. I believe that the Ilocos region in spite of all its problems is faring very well compared with the other regions because of these traits — the continuing practice of thrift, sturdiness, etc. We just don't feel very good when we don't do anything. It has become to be the habit. If I may say so, I'd like to imagine that Vigan is like Athens and the Philippines is Hellas

OPEN FORUM

Participant: Dr. Fernandez said that the Ilocanos must make for political stability and he has enumerated a good line-up of Ilocano greats. What would you say about Jose Ma. Sison and his participation in the Ilokano Movement which justifies President Marcos's move to save the Republic and reform society?

Fernandez: I did not include another Ilocano, General Carlos P. Romulo because he is still alive. Let us leave that to history and history has a very enduring way of rendering judgment. For instance, in his time, Stalin was considered a murderer along with other Russian Tzars. But all the violence is forgotten. It will all depend on the outcome of history. So I think we should reserve that for another time.