

# Philippine Provinces: Division as Accommodation

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## **Philippine Provinces: Division as Accommodation**

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The recent proposal in Congress to carve out Nueva Camarines from Camarines Sur underscores the debates about the division of provinces. A cursory survey of news reports will show that parties on opposite sides of the argument are citing economic reasons though no specific points are outlined.

The whole idea of creating new provinces could well be interpolated in the light of the experiences of neighboring countries. The People's Republic of China, with the second largest economy in the world and a land area 32 times that of the Philippines and more than ten times the population, has only 22 provinces with an additional 11 special divisions for a total of 33. This is the same number of divisions found in Indonesia, a country whose economy is 16<sup>th</sup> in global rank and which holds six times the territory and more than double the population of its Filipino neighbor. Farther afield, one may cite the case of India, with the world's tenth largest economy and a land area of 3 million square kilometers and a population of more than a billion. It has 35 states and territories.

In contrast to these Asian giants, the much smaller and much poorer Philippines has 80 provinces. Of these, thirty were created after 1960. The drive for further division is certainly not dormant. In February of 1995, a bill was approved to create Isabela del Norte and Isabela del Sur. This move was rejected by plebiscite in June of the same year. Also rejected by plebiscite as recently as 2008 was a bill which passed into law in 2007 (without the President's signature) to create Quezon del Norte and Quezon del Sur. Meanwhile, Shariff Kabunsuan in Mindanao came into being in 2006 only to be declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 2008. Two years later the Supreme Court would return the Dinagat Islands to Surigao del Norte only to reverse itself in 2011.

Interestingly, the Philippines' mitotic situation is more closely approximated by Vietnam and Thailand. With an area a fraction higher and a population a fraction lower than the Philippines, Vietnam boasts of 63 sub-national divisions. Thailand, with almost twice the land and less population, has 75 provinces. One could still see that the Philippines has more political divisions than these two ASEAN nations.

What then are the factors which influence the creation of sub-national divisions like provinces and states? Does geography actually have a role? Or is there something about the political situation of the Philippines vis – a – vis China, Indonesia, and India which encourages the creation of sub-national divisions?

It may be helpful to review other divisions in the past. The National Archives of the Philippine holds a copy of a record which ordained the split of Ilocos in 1818 to create Ilocos Norte and Ilocos Sur. Eventually, Ilocos Sur would give up more territory to create Abra and La Union provinces. Related records in the Archives discuss such matters as the choice of cabeza or capital town for the newly created entities. Significantly, there is also discussion about how the creation of a new province will help authorities better supervise the local population which had just experienced a rebellion. Likewise, one justification given for splitting off upland Abra from Ilocos Sur was the point that the residents belonged to ethno-linguistic groups associated with mountain areas and therefore distinct from lowland peoples. This last example highlights how the need to create homogenous units can come into play during the process of division.

Homogeneity may also have been a factor that helped account for the manner in which Negros Island was apportioned. Described as the fourth largest in the archipelago, the island has seen a number of configurations. Negros was administratively part of Iloilo until 1734 when it was established as a distinct military district. The whole island was organized as a military province in 1850. Later on, in 1890, Negros was divided into Negros Occidental (with Bacolod as its capital) and Negros Oriental (with the capital located first in Tanjay and then Dumaguete). The two provinces were joined together as an autonomous republic at the end of the nineteenth century only to be divided again during the first years of the American occupation. In the last years of the Marcos administration the northern part of Negros Occidental was split off as Negros del Norte. This move was eventually nullified for being unconstitutional in 1986 with the advent of President Corazon Aquino's rule. Once more the two provinces were returned to their coupled status.

Remarkable is the fact that, of all the twinned provinces in the Philippines (such as Ilocos del Norte and del Sur, Camarines del Norte and del Sur, Occidental and Oriental Mindoro, Misamis Oriental and Occidental), the Negros Occidental - Oriental pair is the only one which is split along what are largely linguistic and therefore cultural lines. In other words, the residents of one half of the pair do not speak the same language as the other half. Negros Occidental is predominantly Ilonggo speaking while Negros Oriental's language is Cebuano Visayan.

Significantly, Negros is the only island outside of much larger Luzon and Mindanao which is split between two administrative regions, Regions 6 and 7. Consequently, the pair of Negros provinces constitutes the only example that straddles more than one region.

Was language the criterion for carving up Negros? Was there a conscious effort to create two territories whose residents uniformly shared an idiom?

Immediately, it may be seen that there are actually geographical reasons for the split. The classic geography of the Philippines written by Wernstedt and Spencer describes Negros thus:

The main physiographic framework for the island of Negros is provided by a volcanic central cordillera that traverses the length of the island. This central highland reaches its maximum elevation of over 8,000 feet on the summit of the volcano Mount Canlaon. Several peaks north of Canlaon reach above the 5,000 feet contour. The highland core of Negros lies much closer to the east coast of the island.<sup>1</sup>

This mountainous spine which effectively halves the island is thought to account for the linguistic bifurcation. It has often been said that mountains divide while water unites. This saying posits that though the archipelagic nature of the country is often thought to result in fractiousness and an innate inability to agree on things, seas or lakes can actually provide efficient channels for transportation and communication between land masses. After all, it is much easier to cross a narrow strait with ships rather than to scale a steep, cold, jungle-covered peak.

In a similar vein, one need no longer take the terrain-centric perspective that Laguna de Bay is a huge liquid barrier that, inconveniently, requires walking or driving around. Instead, as in the past, it can (and should) be utilized as a great concourse where people and goods can be easily and cost-effectively moved by boats. For this reason, the lakeside town of Angono was, in the earlier centuries of Spanish rule, considered a *visita* and therefore, administratively, part of Pasig. Though the latter is located clear across the water, it was readily reached by banca. Similarly, the residents of Angono, which now in Rizal province, will readily say that they have many relatives from Paete, in Laguna province. This is a reflection of the fact that these two towns, separated by mountains and standing on opposite shores, were the termini for watercraft which plied active fishing and trade routes. Today of course, because the lake is mired in a myopic land-linked orientation, its transportation potential is wasted and its once gleaming surfaces are made unnavigable by illegal fishpens and garbage.

In Negros, the western side which faces Iloilo City speaks Ilonggo while the eastern side speaks Cebuano, Cebu being just a short hop across the narrow Tanon Strait. Of course, there are areas of overlap like the border town of San Carlos which, though still part of Negros Occidental, has many residents with Cebuano as their mother tongue. To complicate matters somewhat, on many sugar farms in San Carlos owned by Ilonggo-phones, farm workers who are Cebuano speakers often learn the language of the plantation owners.

Given the aforementioned observations, it is not surprising that all over the Philippines, mountain ranges mark the general boundaries of linguistic areas. In Northern Luzon, one will find the central Cordillera-Caraballo system dividing the language zones of Ilocano on the western side from the Ibanag areas of the Cagayan Valley on the east. At the same time, the Cordillera also helps create smaller linguistic pockets: Kankanay, Ifugao etc. In this case, communities which are, in terms of sheer distance, not too far from each other speak different languages because of their isolation. Of course, due to other factors which have resulted in mass

migrations, Ilocano is spoken elsewhere too: from Tarlac and Nueva Ecija in the central plains all the way to Mindanao.

The island of Panay is similarly divided. Mountain ranges set off the areas which speak Aklanon (mostly in Aklan province), Kiniray-a (centered in Antique) and Ilonggo or Hiligaynon (Iloilo). There are, however, some intervening variables which affect the language mix. Ernesto Constantino has noted the prestige element attached to Ilonggo as the language of the elites who were enriched by the sugar industry. As such, he has pointed out that even migrant populations in Mindanao who actually speak Kiniray-a, will self-identify, as their mother tongue, its closely allied but certainly distinct linguistic cousin, Ilonggo. Other respondents in Panay itself have explained that though they are aware they are Kiniray-a speakers, they find that they switch to Ilonggo when fashioning (snail mail) letters. They attribute this to the difficulty of rendering in writing the complex diphthongs of their native tongue. To add to this babel, one may note that Roman Catholic Church services are conducted in Hiligaynon/Ilonggo in all the dioceses of Panay. Presumably, the Church did not consider it cost-effective to translate the liturgy to cater to their congregation's linguistic diversities.

Still another example is the island province of Masbate. It may be seen that its north shore which faces Bicol shares the language of that peninsular region. Meanwhile, communities on the southern flank are largely Visayan-speaking like the people of the nearby islands.

So, clearly, the Negros language situation is mirrored in other parts of the country with similar geographic configuration (mountains, seas). What makes Negros island unique is the fact that the two halves of the island not only speak different (albeit closely related) languages, they are also in different administrative regions. In contrast, Leyte province and Southern Leyte province, predominantly speaking different languages (Waray and Cebuano, respectively) form the two halves of one island but are both in the same administrative region, Region 8.

Negros' divisions have historical roots. The mountains have always hampered road construction and communication. One source reports that even though there were already almost 300 kilometers of roads and a thousand kilometers of railway in the 1920s, the eastern highway still remained to be connected to that of the west.

The disconnection seems to be attitudinal as well. The citizens of the Dumaguete half of the island may have long felt that they were neglected in favor of their counterparts on the Bacolod side. In the Spanish colonial period, complaints were filed about the inaction of western based officials on cases from the east. There was also a report which noted that conditions in the east had deteriorated so much due to management issues. It then urged the creation of two administrative entities.

During the last days of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as the American take-over was looming on the horizon, the leading men of Negros Occidental took it upon themselves to make decisions in behalf of the

entire island. They first declared a Negros Republic which encompassed both the eastern and western halves. Then they proceeded to negotiate with the Americans for special protectorate status. In these negotiations, the people of eastern Negros were scarcely consulted. The Occidental group even volunteered to help convince their Oriental brothers. After the invading Americans consolidated their hold on the archipelago, the erstwhile Negros Republic was again broken into two provinces to join the rest of the newly acquired colony.

How then did this unique bifurcation along linguistic and economic lines come about? The possible answer lies in the island's history which is intimately entwined with the sugar industry, for many years among the chief engines of the Philippine economy.

For the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, up to the 1840s, Negros Island remained sparsely populated. Then, with the impetus and stimuli provided by the opening of Iloilo's port to world trade and the need to develop new economic sources to make up for the Spanish empire's loss of the Americas, the stage was set for the favorable reception of Nicolas Loney's (the British vice consul) aggressive promotion of the sugar industry. Among the most receptive to this incipient undertaking was the burgeoning new class of Chinese mestizos in Iloilo. They had been initially edged out by the migrant Chinese from the main industry of their city in those days — hand-woven textiles. When, in turn, this industry collapsed as a result of competition from the cheaper cloth produced by mechanical means, they were desperately in need of other options. Sugar growing proved to be a lucrative alternate and the wilderness of nearby Negros with its rich volcanic soil presented an opportunity to develop large plantations. Soon the Chinese mestizos were colonizing the neighboring island which thereafter would be associated with the sweet crop. Much of their efforts was concentrated in what would later become Negros Occidental, taking advantage of large coastal plains. In contrast, the territories on the other side of the central mountain spine which would eventually make up Negros Oriental, had less flat arable land. Hence, even today, the Oriental side has fewer cane farms or "haciendas".

The sugar plantation-based economy gave Negros a unique complexion. For one thing, settlement patterns were unlike other parts of the archipelago. Instead of population concentrations being associated only with towns, there were also communities that grew around the sugar producing mills or "centrals". Combined with the "hacenderos" or plantation owners' penchant for building mansions on their farms this resulted in many population centers dotting the countryside. Language was one of the legacies that the Ilonggos would bring to their new stomping grounds forever differentiating the Occidental side from the Oriental.

The specific realities in Negros also engendered a distinct culture among the so-called hacendero clans. Filemeno Aguilar described some of its features in his book "Clash of Spirits".<sup>2</sup> Aguilar explains that due to the fact that Negros was host to migrant populations mostly from Panay, there developed a kind of frontier atmosphere with a lot of social mingling and new, ever changing norms. The great risks of planting sugar (e.g. it was susceptible to drought, disease,

fire, pestilence), the constantly fluctuating prices made vulnerable by alternative temperate sources of sweeteners, and the easy availability of loans (crop loans) with future harvests as collateral, gave rise to a gambling mentality. Everyone was willing to take risks to try their luck or *suerte*. Audacity in tempting fate as well as the craftiness to come out ahead came to be admired. With these, ostentatious displays of wealth which advertised one's good luck were the standard. Frugality and saving for a rainy day were not part of the Negrense vocabulary.

Evidently, the Negros elite maintained many ties with Iloilo other than just the linguistic. Up to the earlier years of the twentieth century, while it would be customary for boys of the hacendero class to be educated at La Salle or Ateneo in Manila, their sisters attended Iloilo's Assumption Convent. Many hacenderos, while having made their fortune from cane fields in the shadow of Canlaon, would still come home to build enormous mansions along the boulevards of the mother port or in the neighboring towns of Molo and Jaro. These elaborate piles were often the setting for glittering events associated with such celebrations as the Kahirup Ball or the Jaro Fiesta. During these occasions, elite merrymakers from both islands would try to outdo each other with the luxury of their trappings. Yet, despite this seemingly shared taste for ostentation, the spendthrift and imprudent economic behavior which Aguilar described seemed to be uniquely Negrense. This is what may be what can be discerned by the fact that in the 1990s, for example, one of the largest banks of the country would already have about four branches in Iloilo City, but it would only have two in Bacolod. This might be an indication that the glamorous Negros hacendero lifestyle was not founded on a commensurate propensity to save.

Underlying this yen for risk-taking and defying of convention, Aguilar also discerned a primordial underlayer. Mystic tropes of heroes proving their innate power (*dungon*) have persisted from the classical period. Protagonists in Negros society are said to be testing their will or strength against each other as in the days of old. The Negros realm was seen as the battleground for a "clash of spirits". The Spanish colonizers were presumed to be aided by powerful other-worldly beings which accounted for their easy conquest of the islands. These foreign spirits had appropriated the terrain, prompting Aguilar to suggest that this was why many of the creatures of the Negrense nether region have names with Spanish origins: *engkanto*, *senterno*, *kapre*, *dwende*, *serena*, *demonyo*, etc. It is a poignant metaphor for the pervasiveness of the sense of colonization that even non-physical realms have become dominated by alien forces which are lurking in the deep forests and beneath rocks. This suggests that it is not just the settlements which have become subjugated, but the very land itself.

Success in the socio-political arena came to the ones who were able to ably navigate spheres of contesting elements and to make things bend to their will. Many of the most significant leaders of the Negros society thru the years are seen as men of substance (*maayo na lalaki*) who had supernatural powers. They possessed a strong spirit (*dungan*), were aided by a talisman (*anting anting*), could heal the afflicted, bi-locate, and often made pilgrimages to the sacred peak of Canlaon. Aguilar recounts how Juan Araneta, the chief of the Negros rebels who rose up along

with their other countrymen and women in the turbulent years of the Philippine Revolution, was seen in folk mythology to fit this fantastic trope. So too was a very wealthy entrepreneur, Isidro de la Rama. Both were supposed to have Masonic links and to have engaged in secret rituals which would have scandalized the Catholic church. This defiant stance was the hallmark of the sugar plantation owners or hacenderos.

Buttressed by great wealth- or at least the appearance of it - the hacenderos had a sense that they could go against any institution — the government or the church. They paid lip service to legalities and were adept at skirting or manipulating the law. A strategic bribe, it was thought, could always overcome all hurdles and compunctions.

In such a spirited, frontier atmosphere, it is not surprising that the Negros elite would take a cavalier attitude towards the land itself. Land grabbing cases were common. It must be remembered, too, that the Negros Occidental elite were responsible for that spectacular gesture unparalleled in Philippine history which illustrates how even the nation state is expendable in the face of personal/ class convenience. Perceiving that the American invaders were a powerful group who could, among other things, be able to provide markets for sugar, the erstwhile Negrense revolutionaries had no reservations about making a separate peace. This was regardless of the sentiment of the rest of the archipelago that had just sacrificed so much for the goal of independence, a sentiment which was, until very recently, ostensibly shared in Bacolod.

Without much ado, they petitioned for their self-proclaimed island republic to be made a protectorate of the U.S. Clearly, the cultural, geographic, and political ties that their province long held with the rest of the former Spanish colony could easily be overlooked. Filipinas could be dismembered and an independent territory readily carved out of its carcass for the sake of expediency.

One sees then that the unique position of Negros as a large swathe of fecund, largely uninhabited land allowed it to be colonized by displaced, resource hungry, yet ambitious mestizos from Iloilo. This situation then made possible the development of a robust and rambunctious “frontier” atmosphere where risk taking and the instantaneous generation or loss of great wealth came to be routine. Given such an attitude, land would be regarded as something valuable but at the same time almost ephemeral, interchangeable, easily acquired or disposed. Vast haciendas could be won or discarded at the gaming table. Is it surprising then that territorial boundaries and even political sovereignty as well as alliances could be perceived as easily negotiated to fit one’s agenda?

It may be posited that it was the lay of the land, the specific configuration that involved a central mountain spine, which initially determined the linguistic regions of Negros island. These regions, though roughly equivalent to the territory of each Negrense province are, as mentioned, permeable: many of the eastern towns of Negros Occidental are actually Cebuano speaking.



What is interesting to note is that even as the mountains demarcate linguistic and geographic boundaries, they actually support cultural and perceptual biases as well. While sharing the same island, the Ilonggos of Negros Occidental and their Cebuano speaking counterparts in Negros Oriental are keenly aware of their differences.

Ilonggo children are taught that Cebuanos are “corn eaters” and consequently not as refined as those from the rice-eating world. Thus the words “udong” and “udang” which derive from and describe Cebuanos are synonymous to bumpkin, a person who, reportedly, sees nothing wrong with bringing cooking pots to the table instead of using proper serving plates. A 1918 geography book shows how biases could be affirmed in school:

Rice does not thrive in the shallow limestone soil of Cebu, and besides , though Cebu has some rain during the whole year, it does not have the regular rainy season which has been shown to be so necessary to make rice grow on unirrigated land. Children who live in the rice regions *need not* feel sorry for the children of Cebu. They are quite as happy, healthy and strong *as if* they live where rice grows well...(italics supplied) <sup>3</sup>

Later on in the same book, the authors write that the Visayans of Negros Oriental are “like the people of Cebu, they eat corn as their chief food because the climate, and in most places, the soil, are suited to this crop.”<sup>4</sup>

Only a close reading will unmask the subtle prejudicial perceptions extolled by these texts. Corn is shown to be capable of survival in soil that is shallow and bereft of a rainy season which is regular. Thus corn is unlike rice which needs deep deposits of earth and consistent water supply indicating the latter’s status as the pampered, favored, prestige cereal. Only undesirable fields are relegated to the former, the hapless substitute which is long-suffering and willing, perhaps even suited, to poorer conditions, characteristics which are then transferred to the grain’s consumers. Even as the writers insist that children from rice regions need not pity their corn-gnawing brethren as they are “happy, healthy, and strong” they actually insinuate that the opposite is the more logical assumption. It is in fact an exhortation that, almost as an act of charity and magnanimity, the more fortunate rice gobbling young citizens who form the normal majority should *voluntarily* (need not) refrain from thinking of Cebuano (and by extension Negros Oriental) youth as sad, sickly, and puny, due to their perverse weakness for a second rate carbohydrate source, even though this may be the obvious conclusion. More damning is the hint that the corn eater’s vaunted state of well-being is really a pretense (as if) since only those that live “where rice grows well” can genuinely claim to be blessed.

On the other slope of the mountain, children are taught that Ilonggos are boastful and full of hot air. They are spoiled, arrogant, predisposed to taking unfair advantage of others and therefore not to be trusted.

What the above textbook passages also underscore is the implication that geography may determine the type of crops and cuisine that a territory may support. It does not, however, account entirely for the attitudes and prejudices that will arise around certain cultural traits induced by environment specific variables.

These biases may help explain why the unique arrangement of having the two parts of a provincial pair classified under different regions went largely unchallenged. In the absence of more facts concerning the rationale and process for the split, one may speculate that perhaps the unprecedented regional arrangement was made more imaginable and palatable because the Negroses never had strong reasons to stand together. Even recent efforts during the incumbency of Governor Daniel Lacson to promote the idea of a Negros united programmatically if not politically, did not prosper with his fellow islanders from the other side of the ridge.

In more recent years, a political kingpin almost in the mold of Juan Araneta and de la Rama can be seen in the person of Armin Gustilo, who, in the early 1980s succeeded in getting President Marcos to approve the cutting up of Negros Occidental to form Negros del Norte. Like his predecessors, Armin was seen as a mighty warlord without compunctions who was capable of almost anything to get what he wanted. He rose from relative obscurity and had the suerte to insinuate himself in a position of power. So influential was he that it was considered necessary that he be given his own province so that he would not clash with the established governor of Negros Occidental and Marcos stalwart, Alfredo Montelibano.

It should be clarified that Aguilar's idea of the Negrense patriarchal leader had a spiritual dimension and there is no evidence that Armin was thought to have extra sensory talents. At most, one may hazard a guess that the local folk may have seen in his choice of a location for his luxurious home, the same cavalier attitude that men of his ilk were supposed to possess: he had no qualms in tearing down a secluded balet forest at the delta of a river, traditionally regarded as the abode of spirits. His sister-in-law reported that even as the workers cut down the balet trees (usually inhabited by supernatural beings), they whispered that it was Armin who had made them do it.

Armin's fall from grace was as spectacular as his rise. His collapse bore the mark of someone who had dealt with the fickle spirits that later punished him when his suerte ran out. Not only was the creation of Negros del Norte invalidated by the revisionist Corazon Aquino government but Armin, remarkably, also lost his entire family in one blow - his mother, his wife, and his daughter - all victims of a sea disaster.

Juan Araneta and de la Rama in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and Armin Gustilo in the time of President Marcos, all these men attest to the resiliency of a political culture which was founded on local bigwigs, a gambling mentality, tests of will and suerte, displays of wealth, and intercourse with the supernatural as described by Aguilar.

Is it possible that the Negrense proclivities could have a deeper resonance with the rest of the country? After all, one sees that even President Marcos was thought to have had the protection of an amulet and numerology was whispered to have influenced his decisions.

It can of course be easily demonstrated that provinces outside the principal sugar growing areas have been busy metastasizing in the 20<sup>th</sup> century up to the present. One may note that large provinces like Davao, Cotabato, and Samar have all been dissected in the last few decades. Samar, for example, is now Northern Samar, Western Samar, and Eastern Samar without any apparent basis for how the boundaries were demarcated. Inscrutable too is the reason that there is no Southern Samar. Then again, as was observed earlier, one of the largest provinces that is still intact, Isabela, is under constant danger of being dismembered by moves in Congress.

What all these may actually indicate is that the propensity for provincial mitosis is really a reflection that Philippine elites in different parts of the country share many characteristics of the erstwhile Negros elite. Moreover, one may see in all these, the specter of a weak central state unable to resist pandering to the demands of scissoring elites. One may also speculate that what motivates these demands are the elites' unwillingness and perhaps even inability to generate support beyond a very localized population. As such, instead of having to gather votes and build consensus among the residents of another part of the province where there are competing power brokers, one simply carves up the province.

Could it be that like the heroes of the epics and tales of many Philippine communities, the local elites see land as simply a setting for battles? Towns, mountains, treasures, animals, indeed, even women, are just so much collateral paraphernalia on which to play out a contest of wills and the testing of one's strengths.

What also needs stressing in all of these is that provincial proliferation is not without cost to the general public. Certainly, there are all the expenses of providing new provincial administrative machinery. Though some savings may be realized when, say, a new capital city is established that may deliver services more conveniently, it should still be ascertained if these same services could not have been made available without a whole new province being set up. Economic advantages for provincial creation are often extolled but not clearly explained. What is more readily apparent is how the local elite's interests are implicated by these divisions. When another province sees the light of day, the new positions that such a political unit engenders are often immediately filled up by persons who are glaringly from the same family.

This practice of division as accommodation for competing local elites can also wreak havoc on the formulation of development programs. Part of the problem is the sheer lack of logic behind many of the partitions. How, for example, can it possibly be beneficial if the coastal area of a province that used to surround a bay be suddenly separated from its traditional hinterland to create a new entity with but a handful of municipalities? Once more it may be presumed that the

real rationale is one that only makes sense when seen from elite political agendas. In the case just cited, two competing clans promptly bagged top positions in a cozy power sharing arrangement.

Political mitosis – provincial as well as municipal and so on – can exacerbate non-cooperative even isolationist tendencies in development planning. The Philippine landscape is sadly lacking projects where provinces and towns put funds together to enhance a regional resource. For example, it may be seen that though promoting an around-the-lake tourist program would seem an obvious strategy, there are no twinned campaigns between the lacustrine provinces of Laguna and Rizal for marketing the picturesque charms of Laguna de Bay involving information drives or facility improvements. Instead, local politicians busy themselves with bickering whether the lake's name should be changed to reflect the fact that more of this sublime body of water is really within the territory of Rizal than Laguna. This is unlike, say, the Ruta Maya package in Central America where several countries got together to design a tour as well as provide travel amenities and incentives around a recognized common factor.

One can return to Negros for still another example. Perusing a 1980s economic plan for Negros Occidental prepared by the integrated area development arm of the Office of the Prime Minister, one will hardly see even a mention of Negros Oriental. Lacking are innovative initiatives for joint programs to, say, realize the geo-thermal and hydraulic possibilities of Canlaon Volcano, the great mountain whose slopes the two Negroses share. Lacking too are cooperative bi-provincial tourist programs based on themes culled from shared histories as well as other attractions which, when combined, may generate more market interest.

There is silence about the potential to share the prohibitive costs of joint international port or even airport development. Since Negros Oriental has limited suitable flat land for runways why not build, instead of two modest terminals, a larger, world class, super airport, suitably sited in a contiguous area of Negros Occidental but made accessible to the entire island by light rapid railway transport?

The possibilities are endless yet, clearly, they remain unexplored because once a piece of land is spun off to form an independent province in a different administrative region, it practically falls off the map! Imagine the positive consequences of a paradigm shift that would position Mount Canlaon not as the barrier that separates two alien and hostile peoples, but as the pivotal center of one island with rich resources that can be pro-actively, cost-effectively, strategically, and jointly marshaled!

One final example needs to be discussed perhaps because it is, of all, the most axiomatic. What more eloquent symbol of the country's history, aspirations, and territory can there be than the flag? Its very fabric summarizes and therefore conflates national beliefs with land. Its design embodies what are trumpeted as the Filipino peoples' core values while features like the three stars stand for the island groups they inhabit: Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao. Yet, sadly, it too is

buffeted by the same forces and by the same people that have bedeviled the strange, wonderful patch of earth it stands for.

The sacred status that one would expect for so central a metaphor as the flag is not a given in the Philippine context. The flag's elements have long been a subject of debate and contentions mostly among society's leaders. Like the landscape it represents, it is seen as malleable, subject to the elite's tests of strength in the contest for national attention. The heart of the controversy is the sun and its eight rays which are supposed to refer to the eight provinces that harbored rebels against Spain during the 1896 Revolution. Promptly, the number has raised questions. There have been proposals to include additional rays to evoke the Cordillera and Mindanao peoples' refusal to give in to Spanish colonization.

The crux of the matter is the presumption that the rays do not just stand for eight provinces but for the *first* eight provinces that revolted. Put this way, the many armed sun is perceived to signify a race. Any province which had revolutionary aspirations feels compelled to insist on a ray so as not to fall behind in the competition. Yet, even if additions are eventually accepted, questions may still fester. Take Quezon Province (formerly Tayabas) whose candidacy for a beam is based on the activities of visionaries like Hermano Pule. Since Quezon has had a portion of its territory spun off from it (to make Aurora Province) and is in danger of being broken into two more entities, a problem arises: how many shafts of light is Quezon entitled to? Three?

Then there is the case of Candido Iban and Francisco del Castillo, two young men who both hailed from Aklan. As early as at least 1895, they had contributed funds to purchase the Katipunan's press and participated in many important organizational events such as the pilgrimage to Pamitinan Cave. Del Castillo would later die in battle against the Spaniards while Iban would be executed with 18 others as the Nineteen Martyrs of Aklan. Surely all these justifies Aklan's right to a ray of its own? Yet, a question arises: which province deserves recognition for Iban and company's heroism? Aklan, it must be recalled, then still a part of Capiz.

Moreover, one could question the fairness of ray distribution. Why should certain provinces collectively receive eight beams and the peoples of the Cordillera only get one like their counterparts in Mindanao. Are some contributions more weighty than others?

If one simply adds rays as proposals prosper, when and where will it end? How many more changes can the sun take before it finally hides its face?

A review of the historical record may yield insights. Scrutinizing the original 1896 Ramon Blanco order declaring eight provinces in a state of war, and the 1898 Declaration of Independence in Kawit explaining what the eight rays stood for, will show that there is no specific mention of places having been named because they revolted first. Also, the two documents cite a different set of provinces. The 1896 order includes Tarlac among the eight

while the 1898 Declaration drops Tarlac in favor of Bataan. This discrepancy opens up possible windows for interpretation. It illustrates that the public was probably aware that revolutionary activity was not the exclusive province of just the eight selected by Blanco.

Perhaps the actual identity or even number of the provinces is irrelevant. Perhaps it is wrong to think that rays were awarded on the basis of who was first. Revolutionary fervor transcends time and place. As the case of Aklan and of Tarlac as well as Bataan prove, it is time to recognize that the eight provinces mentioned by Blanco and the eight provinces mentioned in Kawit, actually stand for aspirations that were definitely felt in various parts of the archipelago. The shining sun with its octave of rays is not a reminder of a group of specific territories that rebelled. It is the talisman which clarifies that, for the first time, even the Spanish recognized that what they faced was not just a localized disturbance. What was arising throughout the land was the fervor and the passion that would lead to the formulation of the very first republic in Asia, ill starred as it will prove to be. It is certainly unlike the American flag where the stars represent membership in the union, a different symbolism all together.

This proposition will be met by howls by the proponents of proliferating rays. For the debate is ultimately not about nationalism or even historicity. It is about public relations. It is about aspiring politicians' need to project a national presence as they pursue personal ambitions. What better way to revive a tired career or launch a senatorial campaign but to take on the holiest banner of the country? Perhaps the greatest irony is the fact that what makes the Philippine flag an apt symbol and even substitute for the nation that it flies over, for the provinces, towns, and even mountains and lakes that it brightens, for the very lands and peoples it inspires, is that it too can be reconfigured and ultimately destroyed by the political elites who have sworn to protect it – all in the name of convenience.

This essay aimed to examine what factors – geography, elite politics and so on – affect the creation of sub-national divisions. It focused on the island of Negros to illustrate that geography sets the stage for certain socio-economic conditions to arise which, while forming social players' perceptions, attitudes, and constructs, are by these also transformed. The essay went on to a broader arena and limned how landscapes are inextricable from their meanings, from how they are perceived. Meanings have shaped and continue to shape the responses and initiatives of protagonists, in this case the economic elite, as they fashion the world around them in consonance and contradiction with geography.

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<sup>1</sup> Wernstedt and Spencer, *The Philippine Island World: A Physical, Cultural and Regional Geography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), p. 488.

<sup>2</sup> Filemeno V. Aguilar, *Clash of Spirits*, (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Hugo H. Miller and Mary E Polley, *Intermediate Geography*, (New York: Ginn and Company, 1918), p. 101.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.106.