THE SPANISH 'IMPACT' ON THE
PHILIPPINES, 1565-1770*

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Historians of the colonial period of Southeast Asian history have sometimes assumed that the arrival of the Europeans marks a new ‘period’ in the history of their area. In its most simplified form this leads to a division of Southeast Asian history into ‘pre-European’ and ‘colonial’. Such a division may be justified with reference to the wielding of authority at the upper-most level, for the Sultans of Java and Malaya, and the King of Burma, were replaced by Europeans. But this was not usually the case at the subordinate level. Local leaders often retained the substance of their power, although they were now, at least in theory, subordinate to a European rather than an indigenous ruler. The ‘impact of the West’ on institutions and on the locus of effective local power should not be over-estimated. Similarly, in the area of economic organization and economic change, a greatly neglected area of Southeast Asian historiography, it can be argued that the arrival of the Europeans did not lead to immediate far-reaching changes.

This paper considers this claim with reference to the Philippines. It attempts to describe changes in local level authority relationships, and in the relation of the Filipinos to their environment. It deals only with that part of the Philippines which was under Spanish rule in the two centuries after 1575—the date by when the Spanish were firmly in control of the maritime provinces of the northern and central parts of the archipelago. Except for purposes of contrast, developments after about 1770 will not be considered.

The first aspect of the Spanish impact to be considered concerns authority relationships. The only pre-Spanish unit of society was the

* I wish to thank Professor David Joel Steinberg of the University of Michigan for his valuable comments on an earlier draft of this paper.
barangay\(^1\)). This was based on kinship and mutual dependence, and usually consisted of less than one hundred families. Typically its members made up four groups. They were the small datu class, the so-called nobles, the free men, and at the bottom the dependents. The latter also were often linked to their superiors not only by their dependent status but also by blood ties\(^2\). The strength of this kinship tie was well seen in the case of an injury inflicted by one member of a barangay on an outsider. The injured party’s first claim was against the actual offender, but ultimately all the offender’s kin were responsible in proportion to their degree of relationship\(^3\).

Within the barangay political and social dominance was exercised by the datu. Basically his position rested on his ability to organize the labour force of the barangay\(^4\). His status was buttressed by several social factors. The hereditary nature of the datu’s position reinforced his authority. Furthermore, the datu was the barangay’s arbiter over matters of customary law. A datu maintained his status and succoured his inferiors by sharing some of his wealth, particularly in the form of the ritual feasts in which meat and rice wine figured largely\(^5\).

The Spanish conquest influenced the existing authority relationship in the Philippines in that an alien power imposed a common sovereignty (and religion) over the area of the Philippines with which we are concerned. In practice, both political and religious matters were usually looked after by the same person in the provinces. This was the parish priest, who frequently was the only Spaniard permanently resident in a pueblo, the main unit of local government. Broad policy was now deter-

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1) In the sixteenth century, as earlier, Islam was expanding in the Philippines from its dissemination centres to the South. It was, however, firmly established only in the Southern Philippines, in the islands which the Spanish never controlled. Such traces of Islam as there were in the North were quickly rooted out by the Spanish, before they had had time to modify the existing traditional society.


