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The National Museum of the Philippines:
A Case Study in the Representation of National Identity.

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The National Museum of the Philippines is very much a work in progress. Although it has existed as an institution at least since 1901, it has only had a permanent home and an official identity since 1998. Only part of the museum has so far been opened to the public, but there are ambitious plans for the future and the enthusiasm, professionalism and confidence of the curatorial staff suggest that these will be realised. Indeed, the currently functioning part of the museum — the Museum of the Filipino People — is a very impressive achievement, particularly in view of the economic and political uncertainty of the last few years.

The History of the Nation-State.

In a standard history text sponsored by the Department of Education, Culture, and Sports, the Filipino child is taught that he “has 40 per cent Malay blood in his veins, 30 per cent Indonesian, 10 per cent Negrito, 10 per cent Chinese, 5 per cent Hindu, 2 per cent Arab, and 3 per cent European and American” (Anderson, 1998, p.258).
We need not rehearse here the residual and still resonant effects of three hundred years of Spanish suzerainty and almost a century of U.S. imperialist domination with its persisting stranglehold on the Filipino psyche. This past is the nightmare we are agonizingly trying to awake from (San Juan, 1990, p.9).

Geographically, the Philippine Islands constitute a relatively cohesive archipelago of some 7,000 islands which have been inhabited by humans for over 25,000 years. Many origin myths in the islands tell of the first man and woman being born spontaneously from a bamboo reed planted by the gods (Jocano, 1998, p.103), but prior to the Spanish arrival in the sixteenth century, little is known about life in the Philippines. Trading vessels from China and Japan had been visiting the archipelago for centuries before the Spanish period, but “records of these voyages tell us frustratingly little about the nature of society in the Philippines and as a result our knowledge of life in the Philippines before the Spanish arrived depends largely on the information provided by men who wrote after the colonial presence had become an established fact” (Osborne, 1988, p.47). In general, each trading community seems to have been a separate unit, and while “there was a growing cultural homogeneity, there was political heterogeneity” (Jocano, 1998, p.138). In the northern islands the establishment of Spanish rule was thus facilitated by the lack of strong central organisation, what has been called “a more strikingly kingless society than most” (Reid, 1988, p.120), a situation contrasting to that found in the southern islands, where the adoption of Islam by local chiefs had provided a unifying focus. The Spanish therefore had much more success in exerting power in the north, and the Islamic south remains today a culturally distinct and politically recalcitrant region. Such local rulers as were found in the northern islands by the Spanish were termed by them caciques, an Arawak word still used in the Philippines today to refer to the landowning class that have managed “to maintain their position through centuries of Spanish, a half-century of American, and a half-century of independent Philippine government” (Curtin, 2000, p.94).

A notable feature of Spanish rule in the Philippines, as in the other Spanish colonies but in contradistinction to other parts of colonial Southeast Asia, was the inseparability of church and state; the main agents of the Spanish advance were not traders or soldiers, but priests. The Philippines was therefore to become the one country
in the region where Christianity is the dominant religion, today being 90 per cent Christian. Interestingly, though, this mission was conducted almost entirely through the medium of vernacular languages, so that “Spanish never became a pervasive lingua franca, as it did in the Americas, with the result that, certainly in 1900, and to a lesser extent even today, the peasants and fishermen in different parts of the archipelago could not communicate with one another” (Anderson, 1998, p.195). At the same time, however, the long duration and social penetration of the Spanish influence in the islands “brought into being a growing group of native Filipinos whose education fitted them to assume roles in the state and the church that were denied them because they were not Spanish” (Osborne, 1988, p.49), and who were to lead the revolutionary struggle for independence in the nineteenth century. In fact, Osborne’s summary is misleading; rather than “native Filipinos” the emerging intelligentsia (soon termed ilustrados) were wealthy young mestizos who had been educated abroad. Only at the end of the century did they begin calling themselves Filipinos, “a term which up till then had designated only Spanish creoles” (Anderson, 1998, p.198). José Rizal, the great ilustrado polymath executed by the Spanish in 1896 for his seditious writings, not least the two satirical novels Noli Me Tangere and El Filibusterismo is today venerated as the Philippine national hero and ‘the first Filipino’.

While there had certainly been revolutionary uprisings before, the crucial step came in 1892 with the formation by Andrés Bonifacio, not an ilustrado, of a revolutionary secret society with the Tagalog name Kataastaasang Kagalanggalang na Katipunan ng mga Anak ng Bayan (the Katipunan or the KKK for short): The Highest and Most Respectable Society of the Sons of the People. The choice of Tagalog reflected the Katipunan’s populist ideals, but restricted its scope; Tagalog was incomprehensible outside central and southern Luzon and most of the ilustrados, like José Rizal, wrote in Spanish.¹ Bonifacio’s Manila uprising of 1896 was crushed by the Spanish, but the cause and the leadership were quickly taken up by educated mestizos, and the first Republic of the Philippines was proclaimed in 1899 under the leadership of Emilio Aguinaldo, who had eliminated Bonifacio “in a bloody coup” (Goodno, 1991, p.289), instigating a pattern that was to become a recurring theme in Philippine politics: the monopoly of power by the landed élite. The rather fragile polity that emerged proved to be short-

¹ In 1930 Tagalog was promoted as the official national language, but even by 1960 less than 45 per cent of the population understood it (Anderson, 1998, p.199).
lived, however, riven by internal dissention and finally abolished by the U.S. annexation of the Philippines in 1901 following the Spanish-American war. The Americans succeeded in unifying the entire archipelago, including the Islamic south, but only after “smashing, often with great brutality, all opposition” (Anderson, 1998, pp.200-201) and deploying “a force that outnumbered the insurgent by two to one” (Curtin, 2000, p.31).

The next forty years changed the social and political landscape of the islands to such an extent that Filipinos today refer jokingly to their colonial experience as “three hundred years in a convent followed by fifty years in Disneyland,” although a more sober assessment is made by critics such as E. San Juan, as cited above in the epigraph to this section. From fairly early on, the U.S. made clear its commitment to eventual Philippine independence under a democratic system of government, and still regards the country today as a staunch democratic ally in a strategically vital but politically unstable region. However, as a recent political scientist has noted: “The contemporary Philippine political system is formally democratic, with structures and procedures conducive to an open polity. Informally, however, the system remains oligarchical, ruled by a self-perpetuating elite of landed families that has commanded the political and economic scene for centuries” (Neher, 1991, p.83). The dominance of this cacique class has been perhaps the one stable factor in Philippine history.

A limited form of self-government was granted in 1935 when the U.S. conferred Commonwealth status on the Philippines, a move made mainly in order to appease U.S. protectionists, and much against the wishes of the landowning mestizo oligarchy, who were making huge profits out of access to American markets. Independence had been promised when the Japanese invasion of 1941 drove the Americans and President Manuel Quezon (who had proposed Philippine neutrality and been turned down by Roosevelt) out, following which, in one view, “the oligarchy (one or two celebrated exceptions aside) bustled to collaborate with the invaders” (Anderson, 1998, p.204). A popular Filipino history for children is slightly kinder, suggesting that puppet regime president José P. Laurel had been advised to stay in the country as leader of the Filipino administration by Quezon and MacArthur, “with a view to the protection of our civil population” (Soliven, 1999, p.62), but the issue of collaboration is still a controversial one. At any rate, the war years were extremely difficult for ordinary Filipinos, and the Communist-led Hukbalahap resistance fighters attracted recruits as much for their redistributive social policies as their opposition to Japanese rule.
When the Americans returned to the Philippines, driving the Japanese out with the help of the Hukbalahap forces but at the cost of the almost total destruction of Manila, they immediately prepared for independence by ensuring that the pre-war oligarchy was returned to power irrespective of the dubious wartime record of many of its members and ignoring the claims of their Hukbalahap allies to representation. “Some have argued that American politicians and military leaders, most notably General Douglas MacArthur, saw that conservative interests would best be served by disregarding the issue of association with the Japanese and accepting that most of those who had such an association were to be relied on in peacetime to pursue conservative, pro-American policies” (Osborne, 1988, p.151). In 1946, therefore, Quezon having died in the meantime, his mestizo friend Manuel Roxas, despite his collaborationist past, was installed as the first President of the newly sovereign Republic of the Philippines. The Hukbalahaps understandably went into open revolt against the government, enjoying considerable support among the landless poor, but by the early 1950s had been effectively crushed. “The oligarchy faced no serious domestic challenges” (Anderson, 1998, p.208) from this point, and a succession of more or less forgettable representatives held office until its most notorious scion, Ferdinand Marcos, came to dominate Philippine political life as an increasingly autocratic President running a “machine of corruption and brutality” (San Juan, 1990, p.113) from 1965 until he was deposed in the popular uprising (“EDSA 1”) of 1986.

His successor, Corazón Aquino, the widow of the reformist opposition politician murdered by Marcos in 1983, attained the presidency in a wave of hope and excitement, but this gradually evaporated as she and her successors to the office showed themselves to be unwilling or unable to effect any dilution of the privileges of the traditional oligarchy. A change briefly seemed possible when the populist outsider Joseph “Eráp” Estrada became president, but his deposition in what many consider to have been an oligarchic coup (“EDSA 2”) in 2001 has returned the traditional ruling élite to power. “As of now, participatory citizenship that is able to influence the political centre does not yet exist, and it will encounter formidable obstacles in its realization, such as the power of inertia inherent in the present organization of the political economy, and a well-entrenched political elite that will not easily be dislodged” (Mulder, 1996, p.212).

2 The gifted Ramon Magsaysay, sadly killed in an air crash in 1957 after four years as President, showed signs of defying this mediocre trend.
The History of the National Museum.

According to the commemorative booklet produced by the National Museum in 2001 to celebrate its centennial, "the Philippines saw the birth of the National Museum on October 29, 1901 during the American Administration" (Bulalacao, 2001, p.12). Mention is subsequently made of a "National Museum" (quotation marks in the original) begun in the final years of the Spanish period, but the booklet is at pains to disavow the link between this institution and the one born in 1901. The official guide to the National Museum is a little more informative about the Spanish initiative, noting that it was established in 1887 by royal decree and comprised three sections open to the public: "For Anthropology and Ethnography, there were weapons, household objects, costumes, anitos and other specimens from the Northern tribes. Two galleries were devoted to Natural History while a Gallery of Fine Arts and Industries displayed oil paintings . . . as well as products of Tabayas Province" (Castro, nd, p.8). Although, no doubt, much of this collection found its way back to Spain after the Spanish withdrawal,² it is likely that many items found their way into the 1901 institution, the Insular Museum of Ethnology, Natural History and Commerce, initially operated under the auspices of the Department of Public Instruction by the quaintly-named Bureau of Non-Christian Tribes (subsequently renamed the Bureau of Ethnological Survey). The establishment of the museum as an institution of scientific knowledge was very much in line with the U.S. colonial emphasis on rationality rather than religion: "Ethnological knowledge rather than theological orthodoxy would be the new basis for administering society" (Perttierra, 1997, p.26).

The commemorative booklet summarises the subsequent history of the National Museum over the first century since its founding with admirable succinctness: "founded, merged, divided, abolished, re-established, transferred, reorganized" (Bulalacao, 2001, p.12). In fact, the brevity of the list is misleading as it obscures a bewilderingly complex story of bureaucratic changes in designation as well as physical changes in location over the first 40 years of the museum’s existence. In spite of this instability, some 60,000 specimens had been collected by the eve of the Second World War, only for the collection to be destroyed almost entirely by the American bombing of 1945, in which

² The current director has recalled her indignation at seeing works by Filipino artists from this period exhibited in Madrid as “Spanish Art.”
perhaps 80 per cent of Manila was flattened. In his study of the development of Philippine museums, Eric Zerrudo betrays a distinctly metropolitan sensibility in exaggeratedly asserting that the war “destroyed historic buildings that housed valuable collections and almost obliterated Philippine material culture” (Zerrudo, 1998, p.61), but the damage done to the museum and its collections is beyond question. The official guide laments that only “one-third of the ethnology specimens were saved” (Castro, nd, p.9) but, according to the centennial booklet, “95% of its collections was destroyed during the battle for the liberation of Manila in 1945. The National Museum was not only battered, it was rendered almost completely non-existent” (Bulalacao, 2001, p.13).

The importance of the national heritage was not lost on the government of an independent Philippines, and in 1951 the National Museum was placed under the Department of Education. Over the next two decades, both Filipinos and foreigners began discovering more of the country’s pre-colonial heritage, but “the National Museum was left in the background because of its chronic lack of funds” (Zerrudo, 1998, p.66). The financial situation improved (for cultural institutions, if not for the nation), however, after 1965, when Ferdinand Marcos achieved the presidency and “his grotesque wife” (Anderson, 1998, p.213), Imelda, proclaimed herself Patroness of the Arts. It therefore became socially obligatory for the cacique circle paying court to the First Couple to support a number of cultural causes, including (in 1968) the Cultural Center of the Philippines and (in 1974) the Folk Arts Theater.⁴ Museums also benefited from this cultural renaissance: “Government museums were built at various levels and opened to introduce the arts to the masses” (Zerrudo, 1998, p.68). The architectural heritage of Manila began to be restored, and between 1978 and 1982 the National Museum moved some of its collection into part of the Old Congress Building (Executive House), destroyed during the war, which had been rebuilt to the original plan. This building also housed the Philippine Senate, but the long-term, albeit vague, idea was already in some people’s minds for the museum eventually to occupy the whole of the structure, together with the other two large public buildings on Agrifina Circle to form a museum complex. “This series of events gave a semblance of hope for a much-awaited National Museum” (Bulalacao, 2001, p.13).

⁴ Built, as Zerrudo remarks without apparent irony, “in time for the Miss Universe Pageant” (Zerrudo, 1998, p.68).
In 1987, Father Gabriel S. Casal was appointed Director of the museum and through his energy and vision "was able to mobilize many individuals as well as private organizations to rally behind the National Museum's search for a permanent home" (Bulalacao, 2001, p.16). At the same time, a support group that later became the Museum Foundation of the Philippines was formed, and "waged a nationwide signature and media campaign to establish the permanent home for the National Museum" (Castro, nd, p.9). Most importantly, perhaps, Father Casal had the ear of President Fidel Ramos, and in 1994 attended with him the opening in Paris of the recently excavated "Treasures of the San Diego" exhibition. Ramos was convinced that, on its return to the Philippines, this magnificent collection should not be relegated to storage, and in 1998 signed the executive order designating all three buildings on the Agrifina Circle site as the permanent home of the National Museum.

The Building and its Physical Setting.

The National Museum of the Philippines now comprises, as described above, a complex of three large structures in Agrifina Circle: the Old Congress Building (Executive House), soon to become the National Art Gallery; the Department of Tourism Building, which will house the natural history collection; and the Finance Building, which contains the anthropological and archaeological collections and is the main focus of the complex: the Museum of the Filipino People. The site was originally conceived of as an elegant government centre, a semicircular complex of administrative buildings with a wide view across open parkland westward toward Manila Bay, as envisioned by the urban planner Daniel Burnham in his 1906 development scheme for Manila. Charged by the U.S. government with the construction of an elegant colonial capital exemplifying principles of rationality and modernity, Burnham was heavily influenced by the American "City Beautiful" movement. This style featured key monuments and public buildings linked by wide thoroughfares, extensive parks and open spaces providing visual relief. Although little of the 'Burnham Plan' was in fact executed, and less still is visually accessible today, the grand sweep of the Agrifina Circle site together with the nearby Manila City Hall and Post Office, also built during the American period, give some idea of Burnham's vision.
To put his plan into practice, Burnham chose the architect William Parsons to set up a Bureau of Public Works, which would be the agency responsible for building the structures. Among other projects, Parsons designed the Music College on the University of the Philippines Campus, and the Manila Hotel, both of which remain today as legacies of the imposing Neo-Classical style thought suitable for public buildings throughout the Euro-American colonial world. In 1911, the Filipino architect Antonio Toledo joined the Bureau, having returned from the United States, where he had trained at Brooklyn Institute of Technology, Ohio State and Cornell. He worked with Parsons on a number of projects and, when Parsons left the bureau, was entrusted with the design of a building for the Department of Finance. Toledo adhered in the main to the Neo-Classical style, but incorporated an open central courtyard, “a much-loved feature of Hispano-Filipino architecture” (Castro, nd, p.11); the building’s intriguing trapezoidal floorplan is also a departure from more conventional Neo-Classical architecture. Constructed in 1940, the Finance Building was to be one of the last projects of the Bureau of Public Works; after the war, the newly independent government of the Philippines gave public construction contracts to private companies and the Neo-Classical style was no longer in favour.

Unfortunately for the newly-completed Finance Building, its strategic location in the centre of the city meant that the it was the last holdout of the Japanese forces in Manila during the war, and was very heavily shelled by the U.S. forces. Its eventual capture on March 3rd 1945 signalled the end of the battle of Manila, but the building itself, along with so much of the rest of the city, lay in ruins. Rebuilt after the war to Toledo’s original plan by the Filipino architect Antolin Oreta, the building was occupied again by the Department of Finance until it was extensively refurbished in 1998 to house the Museum of the Filipino People. Although the redesign was carried out by Filipino architects José T. Mañosa and Lor Calma, the Canadian firm of Lord Cultural Resources Planning and Management acted as consultants.

The white stone-clad building is imposingly handsome, especially from the south, where a flight of shallow steps leads up from a large open space to a colonnaded portico surmounted by a restrained horizontal moulding rather than the usual triangular pediment; the effect is austere and dignified. Interestingly, although it is the favoured view on most promotional photographs, this fine façade is not used as the usual entrance to the museum, access to visitors being restricted to a narrow doorway in the northeast corner of the building. The elegant “Marble Hall,” with its stained glass and coffered
ceiling, that the portico leads onto is therefore deprived of its intended function, and is closed to the public at present. The delightful flagstoned courtyard enclosed by the museum provides light to all parts of the building, but is not used except as an open space, except that it contains in one corner a purpose-built traditional Ifugao house on stilts.

Few external signs, indeed, give much indication of the function of the building or the location of this entrance, and such identifying boards as there are tend to be obscured by trees or other obstacles until the visitor is very close. The grounds are not used to extend the exhibition space at all, although the steps and portico have been used for fund-raising concerts, the audience sitting in the open space below. For a city that is not known to be pedestrian friendly, bus stops and a light rail station are within easy and pleasant walking distance of the building, but there are no direction signs to the museum from these points. Taxi drivers and residents are often unsure of the museum’s location. Michael Belcher has noted how “experiences encountered on a visit to a museum will be associated with that museum” (Belcher, 1991, p.24), and there may be a need to render the museum more recognizable and somewhat easier to find. Once inside the museum, a small service area issues tickets and dispenses information. There is an excellent gift shop on the ground floor, selling mainly Philippine handicrafts, but no cafeteria, cold drinks being sporadically available from a vending machine. The building is clean and obviously well-maintained, with toilet facilities on all floors and elevators rendering the whole museum accessible.

The Stated Mission of the Museum.

Many statements exist in official publications in English outlining the National Museum’s mission, along with references to its philosophy, vision, goals and objectives. The most stable, and legalistic version is that found in all the annual reports since the 1998 National Museum Act, under the heading “Mission” as follows: “The National Museum shall be a permanent institution in the service of the community and its development, accessible to the public, and not intended for profit. It shall obtain, keep, study and present material evidence of man and his environment. The National Museum shall inform the general public about these activities for the purpose of study, education, and enjoyable and meaningful learning. The primary mission of the National Museum
shall be to acquire, document, preserve, exhibit, and foster scholarly study and appreciation of works of arts, specimens and historical artifacts” (Alba, 2000, p.2). It is perhaps noteworthy that terms such as “community” and “public” are not defined, although the same page of the report carries, under the heading “Vision,” a sentiment that, with its (rather amusing) verbal slip and less official-sounding language, nevertheless presumably underlies the mission statement: “A Filipino nation, unified by a deep sense of pride in their common identity, cultural heritage and natural patrimony, and imbibed [sic] with the spirit of nationalism and strong commitment to the protection and dissemination of legacy” (Alba, 2000, p.2).

Although the centennial commemorative booklet includes most of the report language in slightly different words (though nationalism must still be imbibed), it begins by asserting, under the heading “Philosophy, Vision and Mission” that the museum’s existence “is anchored on the basic philosophy that the Filipino nation is kept unified by a deep sense of pride in its own identity, cultural heritage and natural patrimony” (Bulalacao, 2001, p.10). It then goes on to use more forceful language than the report in suggesting one aspect the National Museum’s mission: “The national identity of the Filipino must be developed and enhanced, while imbining the spirit of nationalism and strong commitment in the protection and dissemination of its legacy” (Bulalacao, 2001, p.10). Only in the final sentence of the section is the museum said to be “also dedicated to the mission of collecting, preserving, studying, interpreting, and exhibiting the cultural and natural history specimens of the Philippines, from prehistoric times to the present, albeit the diversity of their cultural origins” (Bulalacao, 2001, p.10).

Both report and booklet versions, then, are concerned with national identity, the booklet seeming more explicit about the obligation of the National Museum to develop and enhance such identity. Discussing goals and objectives, the two publications both define the National Museum as having “a tridimensional goal covering diverse fields of knowledge through various cultural, scientific and educational activities” (Alba, 2000, p.3), the cultural aims including “the reconstruction and rebuilding of our nation’s past and veneration of the great pioneers who helped in building our nation” (Bulalacao, 2001, p.11). The editor of the annual report, Elenita Alba, is also the Chief of the Museum Education Division, and in a recent paper has argued that “developmental issues on the lack of social cohesion and ambiguity in the national identity of Filipinos are problems” (Alba, 1998, p.23), and has explicitly emphasised the National Museum’s
rôle, together with schools, in “developing learning programs that would promote nationalism and increase awareness of the Filipino heritage” (Alba, 1998, p.24). In the educational module on “early Filipinos” presented in the paper as an example, she gives one of the objectives as to “learn how to appreciate the culture of our ancestors in the Neolithic period and to be proud of them” (Alba, 1998, p.27). The need for the National Museum to face up to competition from malls and other entertainment venues is acknowledged, which is in keeping with the desire expressed in both the report and the commemorative booklet to make the National Museum “an exciting, informative, and enjoyable place to visit” (Bulalacao, 2001, p.10). “The challenge is for NM to exercise its educational function effectively in relevance to the changes in the national and global community. The call is for the education sector to shape the minds and the value system of the people in order to promote nationhood, national integration and to instill pride in being a Filipino” (Alba, 1998, p.29).

Discussions on the questions raised by the printed statements about the National Museum’s mission, with Ms Alba, as well as with the former Director, Father Gabriel S. Casal, and the present Director, Ms Corazón S. Alvina, confirmed that the identification and the presentation of national identity were indeed prime concerns of the curatorial staff. For this reason, the exhibits are primarily designed with a local audience in mind, although it is also hoped that visitors from abroad will learn more positive things about the Philippines than the rather poor international image that the country is thought to have. Diversity and variety in the Philippines were to be celebrated, but the important thing, Director Alvina told me, was to stress the similarities that naturally arise from a shared lifestyle under broadly comparable environmental conditions. Cultural groups from widely separated parts of the islands had evolved similar solutions to practical problems, and the exhibition of (say) basketry or textiles from different areas could help to foster a sense of common heritage. At the same time, according to the former Director, “Filipinos do not have a memory” (Father Gabriel Casal: personal communication, April 2001), so it is important to stress the historical continuity of cultural patterns. The museum, all three of my interviewees agreed, is both a repository of knowledge and a forum for dialogue; above all, though, it is a place to make Filipinos proud of their shared culture.

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5 Father Casal lamented that the Philippines, in his experience, was known for three things: bar girls, maids, and Imelda’s shoes. To which must now be added, he supposed ruefully, Abu Sayyaf.
Political and Financial Control.

In 1998, as a provision of the National Museum Act described above, the museum was detached from the Department of Education and placed directly under the Office of the President. While this move has apparently simplified the bureaucratic procedures for the museum, it does render it more susceptible to changes in the level of support from the incumbent President. So far, this has not proved to be a problem: Former President Fidel Ramos, who signed the 1998 act and energetically promoted the cause of the museum, is an enthusiastic believer in the rôle that the National Museum "plays in national development, through the expansion of cultural awareness among our youth, and the instilling of a higher level of national pride and patriotism among our countrymen and countrywomen" (cited in Bulalacao, 2001, p.5). The next incumbent, Joseph Estrada, was not in office long enough to have had much influence, but on an official visit to the museum during his Presidency was so taken with one of the interactive displays that he stayed well beyond his scheduled visit time, to the consternation of his aides (Father Gabriel Casal: personal communication, April 2001). Although the current President, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, has also not been in office very long, she has warmly commended the National Museum in writing for "promoting our national culture that will make us proud as a people and a nation" (cited in Bulalacao, 2001, p.4).

According to both Father Casal and the current Director, Ms Corazon Alvino, political interference in curatorial decision-making is minimal to the point of non-existence. The post of Director is a professional appointment, and has gone on the last three occasions to anthropologists with extensive museum experience. The Director reports to a board of ten trustees, some of whom are political appointments, some elected political representatives and some museum professionals, but the board acts as a consultative body rather than a watchdog committee, and does not attempt to influence internal museum policies. Indeed, the present Director envisages one aspect of the museum's function as a force for correcting social imbalances, and is contemplating an exhibition on land ownership in the Philippines that could prove highly embarrassing to many members of the ruling oligarchy, and yet does not anticipate any political pressure to dissuade her from this project.

In accordance with this general policy of non-interference, the National Museum
budget is determined on a lump-sum basis, and the 14 internal divisions of the museum then debate its proportional allocation. With the exception of the botany division, the museum is not collecting objects or specimens at present, which allows budget resources to be concentrated on consolidation rather than acquisition. The Director feels strongly that the museum should do a good job of cataloguing, researching and displaying what it has, before it seeks to acquire more. Private sponsorship for special exhibitions and for the museum as a whole is actively sought, but the sponsor has no influence over the content or presentation of the resulting exhibition. Acknowledgement of sponsorship in the case of permanent exhibitions is extremely restrained, limited to a small label identifying the sponsor above the entrance to the gallery.

The entrance charge to the museum for adults is 100 Pesos ($2), which is fairly steep in comparison to local wage scales; there are, however, several discounts for senior citizens, students and groups, and one day a week is free to all visitors. Free guided tours of the museum by museum-trained docents are available at set times during the week, and regular showings of the multi-media Object Theatre presentation are included in the admission price. The new Director has several ideas for outreach programs that would involve the local community more, and is particularly enthusiastic about bringing street children into the museum and using storytellers and puppeteers to teach them about Filipino history and culture (and, not incidentally, provide them with a good meal). She would also like to reduce admission charges, but given the high costs of maintenance in the museum buildings at present, this may not be possible.\footnote{In her previous post as Director of the Manila Metropolitan Museum, the Director set admission fees by charging the same as for a Big Mac: about 60 Pesos. (Ms Corazon S. Alvina: Personal communication, May 2002.)} Overall, there seems to be a very positive attitude on the part of the museum staff, along with a great deal of political goodwill toward the museum. One of the Director’s first projects will be to revise the appropriate policies for exhibition, education and acquisition in the museum, and it will perhaps be a challenge to maintain the current level of political support in the light of the social amelioration programs that the Director wishes to introduce.

Divisions and Themes.

The five-storey Finance Building has been divided into twelve exhibition spaces, plus a shop and a multi-media theatre. The topmost floor is not used for public display at
present, and some of the galleries on the other four levels are empty. The generally excellent gallery guide, free with admission to the museum, numbers the galleries in use on the first three levels from 1 to 8, but as the fourth level is used for temporary exhibitions of varying space requirements, it is not numbered. What follows is a brief overview, in order of their presentation in the guide, of the disposition and thematic content of the galleries currently in use.

Gallery 1 is on the right of the ground floor entrance and runs the length of the north wall of the building. It is devoted to the wreck site of the San Diego, a Spanish ship built in the Philippines and sunk in a battle with the Dutch near Manila Bay in 1600. The exhibit takes the form of a walk-through diorama, recreating the 1991-92 excavation site 50 metres below the sea. Dim, blue lighting and ‘oceanic’ sound effects attempt to convey something of the atmosphere of underwater archaeology to visitors.

Gallery 2, on the south side of the building below the portico, features a selection of pieces from the national Museum’s art collection entitled “The Best of Philippine Art” and claiming to represent, according to the signboard at the entrance, “the very essence of Philippine visual art as interpreted by Filipino artists.” Much of the artwork has something of a nationalist flavour, yet the subject matter is emphatically Christian. “The exhibit is highlighted,” as the guide has it, by two sculptures by Rizal. These pieces are all to be moved to the Old Senate Building when its conversion into a National Gallery is completed in the near future.

Gallery 3 is on the east side of the second level, and contains artefacts retrieved from five shipwrecks from around the Philippine archipelago. Entitled “Five Centuries of Maritime Trade Before the Arrival of the West,” the gallery visually documents the “vibrant trading activities” (Castro, nd, p.29) that took place in pre-contact Southeast Asia with the Philippines as an important maritime hub. Interestingly, the exhibition labels itself as a “storage exhibit for specialists” and presents items in museum packing and storage contexts rather than using more conventional means of display.

Gallery 4, on the north side, takes up the story of the wreck of the San Diego, placing the battle in the context of the Spanish galleon trade of the time — “the world’s first trade route linking Asia, America and Europe” (Castro, nd, p.59). The exhibit covers the circumstances of the battle in detail, but also includes a section called “The Philippines of the Filipinos,” describing the situation in the islands before the Spanish colonial period.
Gallery 5 continues the San Diego theme, displaying the objects recovered from the wreck: ceramics, weapons and everyday household items. Some of the artefacts are presented conventionally in cases, while others are contextualised in small dioramas.

Gallery 6, occupying the eastern wing of the third level, is, according to the guide, one of “the best galleries that present information on the origin of the Philippine islands and the Filipinos as a whole.” The importance afforded this gallery is perhaps indicated by a signboard at its entrance that proclaims: “To foretell the destiny of a nation, it is necessary to open the book that tells of her past.” Starting with the geological formation of the archipelago, the exhibit makes use of an impressive variety of techniques in presenting information on the first traces of human settlement in the islands, theories regarding their provenance, the development of trading networks integrating the Philippines, and a large excavated boat. A section of the gallery is provided with seats where visitors can listen to stories of various archaeological discoveries, related by the archaeologists concerned, and there is a display of ongoing archaeological excavations in different parts of the country.

Gallery 7 is a small exhibition space above the entrance hall in the northeast corner of the building. Entitled “Archaeological Treasures,” it is devoted to what the guide terms “burial practices of ancient Filipinos” and features a stunning collection of burial jars and other pottery pieces, as well as a tiny diorama showing the discovery of some of these anthropomorphic jars in a cave by archaeologists. Rough, dark stucco walls, dim lighting and an uneven floor help to create a suitably subterranean atmosphere in this little gallery.

Gallery 8, on the north side of the same floor, is called “The Filipinos Today” in the guide, but “Uniquely Filipino” at the entrance. It gives, says the guide, “an insight into a diversity of culture that is truly Filipino,” and the exhibit does an excellent job of introducing the Philippines ethnographically, using maps, interactive displays, dioramas and artefacts to present the languages, belief systems and material culture of the islands. The exhibit is divided into four main areas: the Filipino people; ecological zones; national treasures; and national living treasures.

Also on this level on the west side is the Object Theater, the site for a regularly-shown multi-media presentation using objects, photographs and a 25-minute film entitled “The Story of the Filipino People.” The fourth level is used for temporary exhibitions in galleries of variable size. At present, there is a small exhibition on “Cloth Traditions of
the Philippines" featuring traditional textiles. A superb larger exhibition next door is devoted to the silk weaving and brass working traditions of the Muslim communities of Mindanao, adroitly including a wealth of cultural information on the history and lifestyles of these societies.

As part of the ongoing reconstruction of the National Museum, all the above galleries and their disposition are subject to change. Conversations with the Director, however, have confirmed that the San Diego exhibitions are likely to remain as they are, being among the most popular exhibits in the museum. Galleries 6, 7 and 8, those devoted to the Filipino people and their heritage, are also unlikely to change very much, as they are considered to represent most directly the main mission of the museum: creating an awareness of, and pride in, Filipino culture.

Exhibition Strategies.

As indicated in the previous section, a wide range of display techniques is employed in the museum, often within the same gallery. Traditional cased artefacts and signboards are situated beside computer terminals linked to sophisticated interactive databases, or across from elaborate dioramas and reconstructions. The museum has clearly been carefully designed to appeal to a wide spectrum of visitor learning styles as well as to different levels of knowledge, experience and interest. As a general rule, each discrete topic is presented in at least two ways; one immediately accessible, and one that requires some effort. An example is the geological display at the entry to the "Story of the Filipino People" gallery. A large mock-up of a volcano, sound effects and flashing lava flows available at the touch of a button, crudely illustrates the volcanic origin of the archipelago. Next to it, a computer terminal offers detailed video presentations in Tagalog or English on how the islands attained their present shape, showing how the land masses looked in different geological epochs. Another instance, in this case using the more complex technology for the introductory presentation, is on musical instruments around the Philippines. The visitor stands in front of a blue screen and indicates an area on a touch-screen map. A video camera captures the visitor's image and a computer simultaneously places that image against a landscape typical of the area indicated, together with a musical instrument from the region. By making appropriate arm movements, the visitor can then watch him- or herself "play" the instrument, producing
its sound. Ethnomusicological information for the more left-brain inclined visitor is available in conventional display cases against the wall of the gallery.

Stephen Greenblatt has argued that “the impact of most exhibitions is likely to be enhanced if there is a strong initial appeal to wonder, a wonder that then leads to the desire for resonance” (Greenblatt, 1991, p.54). In the museum galleries generally, as in the two examples given above, an excellent balance is maintained between these two (not entirely separate) qualities. With the partial exception of the temporary art gallery on the ground floor, nothing is displayed for its aesthetic value alone; there is a contextual justification for every object shown. Lighting may often be deployed to dramatic effect, as in the subaqueous azure of the San Diego wreck site gallery, or the cavernous gloom of the burial jar exhibit, but the sign boards and labels are for the most part clearly lit and intelligently placed. Dioramas are subordinated to the needs of their component objects, and are obviously not intended to be convincingly realistic replications of the original contexts of those objects. Structural pillars or wall sections may be cleverly finished to resemble geological or archaeological strata or shell middens, but nowhere pretend to be anything but illustrations. A map showing where neolithic stone tools have been found is accompanied by replicas of the tools concerned and a sign encouraging visitors to pick them up and handle them, feeling their heft and appreciating their conscious design. To sum up, artificiality is used as a tool for suggesting contextual atmosphere, not in a Disneyesque attempt to manufacture experience.

Another way that the museum contextualises its collection is by supplying a human reference for the objects. Wherever possible, individual makers and original owners are acknowledged, or at least the artefact’s place of origin, and outstanding individuals in certain cultural fields are honoured as living national treasures. A display on the ethnic variety of the Philippines features a wall of large portrait photographs, not of the usual tourist brochure ethnics in colourful tribal costumes, but real people, often in jeans and T-shirts. For the four large exhibits on ethnic groups said to exemplify the lifestyles (housing, tools, ritual objects) dictated by the four main environmental divisions of the Philippines — coastal, lakeside, highland and lowland — the museum has supplied a book of contemporary photographs of tribal members, freeing them to some extent from the cryogenic effect of the ethnographic snapshot.

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7 This was the interactive display that so captivated former President Estrada, who had been a film actor before turning to politics.
Explanatory labels throughout, with few exceptions, are presented in English and Filipino, the national language heavily based on Tagalog. Museum policy dictates that the information be the same in both languages, but not rigidly transliterated, the present Director believing that the text will read more naturally if it is not forced into the pattern dictated by an unrelated language (Ms Corazon S. Alvino: Personal communication, May 2002). Although the selection of Tagalog as the national language has been a sensitive issue, and the principle of bilingual education (in English and Filipino) has only produced what Goodno has called “a generation inadequate in both languages” (Goodno, 1991, p.262), the museum’s policy reflects the government’s. Nevertheless, the “Story of the Filipino People” gallery takes great care to discuss other languages indigenous to the islands with respect. A large ethnolinguistic map of the Philippines shows the location of the 100 or so language groups, and an interactive computer screen allows the visitor to hear common phrases from about a dozen of these. A signboard notes that over 90 per cent of Filipinos speak one of the 8 major languages in the islands, and details the efforts that the national Museum is making to preserve some of the more threatened minority languages, including the production of textbooks in indigenous scripts. A quote from José Rizal, very much a unifying symbol as the national hero of the Philippines (even if he wrote mainly in Spanish), appears in various places in the gallery, each time in a different language, and seems to articulate a principle underlying the gallery’s construction from both a national and regional point of view: “If you do not know where you come from, you cannot know where you are going.”

Overall Impression.

Given their entrenched privileges, suggests Niels Mulder, it is hardly surprising that the landowning Filipino oligarchy “has no interest in promoting nationalism, a civil society, the rule of law, or a sense of the common weal” (Mulder, 1996, p.205). Such nationalist spirit that does exist, moreover, is said to be narrowly defined in exclusive, ethnic terms: “Just below the surface there is still an openness among the mestizo majority to racism towards Chinese or indigenous tribal minorities” (Putzel, 2000, p.184). James Goodno has asserted baldly that “Philippine education . . . fails to inculcate a sense of pride in the nation and its history” (Goodno, 1991, p.261), and these bleak assessments are typical of a great deal of academic writing on the contemporary
Philippines. Even the normally reliable Benedict Anderson displays a certain lack of sympathy with what he characterises as “a Filipino nationalism that has been, for a century now, on the trail of an aboriginal Eden” (Anderson, 1991, p.166). A report on Filipino values commissioned by the Philippines senate in 1988 seemed to support such statements, concluding that, among other failings, “Filipinos have a feeling of national inferiority . . . Filipino elites are often alienated from their roots and from the masses of the people, most of whom they scorn” (Neher, 1991, p.72). Clearly, a national identity problem is perceived to exist; how does the National Museum attempt to address it?

In notable congruence with Smith’s ethnosymbolist theory of nationalism (Smith, 2000), the museum exhibits stress three main themes: historicity, inclusiveness and achievement. The historicity of the nation is very effectively yet unobtrusively conveyed by the naturalistic usage throughout of the terms “Philippines” and “Filipino” to refer to the archipelago and its inhabitants from the earliest times. A detailed chronological chart near the entrance to the “Filipino People” gallery presents a continuous timeline from 800,000 B.C. to 2,000 A.D. Even the geological exhibit refers to the “Creation of the Philippines,” and neolithic tools are labelled as having been fashioned by “early Filipinos.” A large signboard presents fairly the two main theories concerning the origins of Austronesian culture: that of Bellwood, arguing for a homeland in mainland China, and the Solheim theory, suggesting that Austronesians were insular in origin. In either case, the signboard concludes, “the Philippines had a key role in the development of early Austronesian culture.” In an exhibit entitled “Gateway to the World” a large globe displays the different trade routes centering on the Philippines during the “Age of Contact,” 500 A.D. to 1400 A.D., and the accompanying signboard explains that: “The Philippine islands have always been a crossroads of cultural exchange.” The emphasis throughout on archaeology very effectively suggests a link across centuries through such exhibits as the hands-on neolithic tools bench, the “Preserving Our Heritage” display, and the storytelling corner, where visitors are encouraged to “listen and imagine” how their ancestors lived.

The use of the terms “Philippines” and “Filipino” also helps to develop the sense of inclusiveness; the feeling that, irrespective of any particular ethnicity, being Filipino is the heritage of all citizens. More specifically, the ethnographic exhibits in the museum deepen this sense of belonging by emphasising that: “The Philippines is a land of diversity, a crossroads, and a woven tapestry of cultures.” Furthermore: “People
develop cultures and cultures develop people — with each changing the other over time.” The exhibits are for the most part free of evaluative language (although a signboard refers, in an odd phrase, to the Ifugao as “the most popular hilltribe” ), and cultural variations are generally presented as reasonable responses to different environmental conditions. Given the separatist ambitions of the southern Muslims, for instance, it is remarkable to see a signboard on a display of Mindanao weaving explain that “Islam is not only a set of religious rules but a form of government, a way of life.” In the film shown in the Object Theater, in fact, it is claimed that the adoption of Christianity was a natural development in the history of the Filipinos, since most of the ethnic groups believed anyway in one creator god — a feature that could equally well lead to the adoption of Islam. The film goes on to define “the essential Filipino” in terms seemingly deliberately chosen to avoid the possibility of excluding anyone: “Spiritual, peaceful, cultured and fun-loving.” Overall, the intention seems not to be that of defining a national identity and then asking people to subscribe to it, but rather of taking “Filipinohood” for granted and looking respectfully at the different ways there are of being Filipino. The result is refreshingly free of nationalist propaganda. As the novelist F. Sionil José defines the term: “Nationalism precisely means this — involvement with people. It is not just an appreciation of the land, of its symbols. Verbosity can never define it. Or cheap shots like donating new flags to public schools” (José, 1999, p.66).

The strands of historicity and inclusiveness are combined in the museum with a focus on the achievements of the Filipino people. A display of “Philippine Prehistoric Pottery” in an exhibit entitled “The Philippines of the Filipinos” is accompanied by a signboard stating that: “The presence of pottery implies the existence of a highly complex technology corresponding to the complexity in structure and organization of the society.” Even early Filipinos, it is thus implied, had a culture in which their descendants can take pride. The museum, however, avoids the narrow focus that a conventionally nationalist view of traditional culture would imply, taking instead the imaginative step of making the very diversity and multicultural adaptiveness of the nation sources of pride. Migration and external influence are not only openly acknowledged, but celebrated. “It is the variety of adaptive techniques and cultural diversity throughout the archipelago that makes the Philippines unique,” claims one signboard.

Individual cultural achievements, in poetry, music, weaving, are honoured through the “Living Treasures” exhibit, and “National Treasures” are given full
cultural contexts: they are Filipino, but they are also Ifugao, T’Boli, Sama d’Laut. Historically famous Filipinos, however, are hardly represented; quotations from José Rizal are displayed in many places around the museum, but the only exhibit devoted to the great hero and martyr of Philippine independence from Spain focuses on his work as an ethnographer, showing his correspondence with the German scholar Blumentritt. In fact, the attention paid to the colonial period generally, and the independence struggle in particular, is initially surprising. Given the longue durée thrust of the museum’s nationalist perspective, however, it may have been felt inappropriate to devote a disproportionate amount of space to one influence among many. Gregory Jusdanis, writing about the Philippines, suggests a further possibility: “For ultimately nationalism is built upon a difference from a hegemonic power. And this difference is always seen in cultural terms, that is, the ‘traditional’ way of life. To protect this domain, however, the local has to borrow from the foreign while it resists it” (Jusdanis, 2001, P.98). In the Philippines, as the National Museum demonstrates with such flair, there is no one traditional way of life to assert. Unless it be that of a historically rooted, inclusively mediated, all-embracing diversity.

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The Director has also stated that the National Historic Institute has responsibility for artefacts and archives from the Spanish period (Ms Corazon S. Alvino: Personal communication, May 2002).


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