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Imperial Shadows: US Colonialism and the Disruption of Pilipino Identity, 1898-1946

By Janelle Amores Perez

Abstract

For 48 years, the United States (US) implemented a colonial project that extended beyond mere territorial control to fundamentally reshape Pilipino identity and cultural self-perception. Resulting in the defeat of Spain at the end of the Spanish-American War. The Treaty of Paris was signed on December 10, 1898, and the United States formally acquired and annexed the Philippines due to Spain's loss. The United States then entered the imperialist game, competing with other countries, such as Spain, China, the United Kingdom, France, Japan, and the Russian Empire, to expand and benefit from its occupied territories. In places like the Philippines, the United States imposed its culture and influenced certain aspects of these places to align with its values. This paper examines the critical question: "To what extent has the United States' colonization of the Philippines impacted Pilipinos' perception of their culture following the Spanish-American War to Philippine independence from 1898 to 1946?" Using a framework informed by postcolonial theory, this investigation analyzes sources from both the United States and the Philippines from people like American official Jacob Gould Schurman, US historian Michael Salman, Philippine revolutionary Apolinario Mabini, and cultural historian Bienvenido Lumbera. By juxtaposing the "benevolent assimilation" narrative against the lived experiences of colonized Pilipinos, this paper reveals how US imperialism enacted not only territorial annexation but a profound epistemic violence that continues to shape Pilipino cultural identity well beyond formal independence. This analysis contributes to broader postcolonial discourse by illuminating how imperial power operates simultaneously through explicit force and the subtle manipulation of cultural consciousness.

Background

After the five-month Spanish-American War, which took place in 1898 between Spain and the United States, the war came to a close in August, resulting in the defeat of Spain.[1] Subsequently, the Treaty of Paris was signed, bringing the two countries to a peaceful agreement, and the Philippines, in exchange for USD 20,000,000, was ceded to the Americans.[2] The United States then started to officially occupy the Philippines, noting that their occupation was to give “humanitarian aid” and help the Philippines establish its own formal, centralized government after nearly 400 years of colonization and oppression by other countries like Spain.[3] The United States government promised the Philippines freedom, but, as an institution and in

[1] Elliott. Charles Burke. *The Philippines to the End of the Military régime; America Overseas.* The University of Michigan, 1916.
[2] Elliott, *The Philippines to the End of the Military Régime.*
[3] Dolan, Ronald E, and Library of Congress. Federal Research Division. *Philippines: A Country Study.* Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress: For sale by the Supt. of Docs., U.S. G.P.O, 1993. Pdf. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <www.loc.gov/item/92039812/>.

alignment with political agendas, did not feel like the Philippines was ready to establish its government at that time, fresh from its Spanish colonization and without a robust central authority government.[4] Divergent perspectives on United States annexation among the colonized Philippine population ultimately triggered the Philippine-American War of 1899-1902.[5] The United States continued to occupy the Philippines until 1941, when it lost the Philippines to Japan, and eventually gained the Philippines back; the US was the one to grant the Philippines independence in 1946.[6]

[4] Rogers, William Allen. "Uncle Sam's new class in the art of self-government." (1898).
[5] Elliott, *The Philippines to the End of the Military Régime.*
[6] *Dolan and Library of Congress, Philippines: A Country Study.*



UNCLE SAM'S NEW CLASS IN THE ART OF SELF-GOVERNMENT.

Figure 1. The cartoon visualizes the United States' Uncle Sam hitting a Cuban ex-patriot and guerrilla as punishment in his class of "self-government" to enforce his dominance in defining "self-government" for these countries occupied by the United States. Pictured here are Emilio Aguinaldo (Philippines), Máximo Gómez (Cuba), Hawai'i, and Puerto Rico. This 1899 political cartoon illustrates the "benevolent assimilation" rhetoric that masked violent colonial control while depicting the colonized as childlike and in need of the United States' instruction.[7]

[7] Rogers, *Uncle Sam's New Class*.

Introduction

Over 48 years, the United States occupied the Philippines and established itself as a colonial sphere of influence.[8] The United States won the Spanish-American War, and formally annexed the Philippines as a condition of the Treaty of Paris, signed on December 10, 1898, as a result of Spain's loss.[9] As said by Anderson Stephenson in *Manifest Destiny: American Expansionism and the Empire of Right*, "... the threat of such a prospect had forced the phenomenon of imperialism upon the attention of Americans… The immediate effects were at least twofold… a sort of prescriptive imperialism, a conviction that the United States should seize desirable areas before a rival power got them."[10] The United States then entered the imperialist game, competing with other countries, such as Spain, France, Japan, and the Russian Empire, to expand, profit, and benefit from its occupied territories. In places like the Philippines, the United States imposed its culture. It influenced aspects of cultural values, language, education, perceptions of health,[11] and government infrastructure to be more aligned with their values.[12]

This paper will examine how United States colonization influenced the perception of Philippine culture among its people and its perception as a colony during the US occupation in the Philipines. This paper will also approach the historical debate that surrounds this topic, which may include perspectives that address US imperialism or humanitarian aid as a reason for why the US decided to colonize the Philippines. The question that will be investigated is "To what

[8] Elliott, *The Philippines to the End of the Military Régime.*
[9] Elliott, *The Philippines to the End of the Military Régime.*
[10] Stephanson, Anders. *Manifest Destiny: American Expansionism and the Empire of Right*. 1st ed. New York: Hill and Wang, 1995.
[11] Heiser, Victor G. "American Sanitation in the Philippines and Its Influence on the Orient." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 57, no. 1 (1918): 60–68.
[12] Pitt. Harold M. *The Facts As to the Philippine Islands: Compiled for the Enlightenment of the American People.* [S.1.: s.n., 1913.

extent has the United States' colonization of the Philippines impacted Pilipinos'[13] perception of their culture following the Spanish-American War to Philippine independence from 1898-1946?" To answer this question, I will examine the text "Philippine affairs; a retrospect and outlook; an address," by Dr. Jacob Gould Schurman of the First Philippine Commission[14] and *The Embarrassment of Slavery: Controversies Over Bondage and Nationalism in the American Colonial Philippines* by historian Michael Salman, both a primary and secondary source from a US perspective. In Contrast, I will also juxtapose these US sources to Philippine Revolutionary Apolinario Mabini's "A Filipino Appeal to the People of the United States," and Philippine Scholar Bienvenido Lumbera's "Edukasyong Kolonyal: Sanhi at Bunga ng Mahabang Pagkaalipin (Colonial Education: Causes and Effects of Long Slavery)," both being primary sources written in English from the period and as a secondary source originally transcribed in Tagalog from 2007 as accounts from Pilipino people. Utilizing the above sources will help provide a more profound and nuanced understanding of this investigation, hopefully informing the development of future academic scholarship tangential to this topic.

Section 1: U.S. Influence — Power, War, & Politics

As the United States expanded its ambitions in war and politics, it gained significant power alongside its influence. President McKinley's term from 1897 to 1901 was during the Spanish-American and Philippine-American wars.[15]As President of the United States, William McKinley said in an interview addressing the annexation of the Philippines:

I went down on my knees and prayed Almighty God for light and guidance more than

[13] Throughout this paper, the author deliberately uses "Pilipino" rather than "Filipino" to reflect the native pronunciation and spelling. The "P" spelling acknowledges that native Philippine languages had no "F" sound before Spanish colonization imposed this foreign phoneme. In a paper examining the impacts of colonization, the author has chosen not to perpetuate colonial linguistic alterations except when directly quoting sources that explicitly use the term "Filipino."

[14] Also known as the Schurman Commission

[15] Elliott, *The Philippines to the End of the Military Régime*

> one nigh (1) That we could not give them back to Spain- that would be cowardly and dishonorable; (2) that we could not turn them over to France or Germany- our commercial rivals in the Orient- that would be bad business and discreditable; (3) that we could not leave them to themselves- they were unfit for self-government- and they would soon have anarchy and misrule over there worse than Spain's was; and (4) that there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them [16]

McKinley stated his motives for the Philippines as president of the United States. McKinley also expressed his view that the Philippines was not in the right state to govern itself. As he said, "nothing left for us to do." It was in the interest of US foreign policy to help the Philippines through education, development of civilization, and Christianization. Since this became the United States' duty, the annexation was also seen as a probe into what the United States could do to benefit from the Philippines and its resources through the lens of politics. Additionally, in 1898, the author of *The Duty of the American People As to the Philippines.* wrote, "In one sense it is fortunate that the Philippinos[SIC] have been indurated (ratified) to corruption, for the reason that, while new methods are necessarily liable to entail some mistakes and make some losses, the margin created by honest methods ought to be more than large enough to carry the new authorities over the experimental period."[17] The United States saw Pilipinos as incapable of self-government after the ratification to this "corruption," which portrayed Pilipinos as inferior, weak, and untrustworthy in their eyes.

The author reveals that he felt it was better for the Philippines to be "corrupt," so the United States could "aid" them with their problems and act as their saviors. Discernibly, the United States was idolized and placed on a pedestal to seem like they were helping the

[16] Rusling, James F. "Interview with President McKinley:" The Christian Advocate, vol. 78, 1903. https://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtID=3&psid=1257, Accessed 2024.
[17] [Publicola], pseud. [from old catalog]. *The Duty of the American People As to the Philippines.* [n. p., 1898.

Philippines out of goodwill. Following this, Dr. Jacob Gould Schurman wrote, "And having secured the confidence and friendship of the leading Filipinos in Manila, having convinced them of the humane and beneficent intentions of our Government, having satisfied them that American sovereignty was only another name for the liberty of Filipinos."[18] Dr. Schurman was Cornell University's 3rd president and the head of the First Philippine Commission, created by President McKinley to advise the U S government on how it could utilize the Philippines and establish this new colony within the US political system.[19] US politicians viewed their efforts towards the Philippines as humanitarian, when, in reality, they used US sovereignty as an excuse to impose its ideals of government infrastructure and democracy within the Philippines. As author Ronald E. Dolan in his book, *Philippines: A Country Study* wrote, "The most important step in establishing a new political system was the successful cooptation of the Filipino elite called the 'policy of attraction…' Subsequently, they worked closely with the Schurman and Taft commissions,[20] advocating acceptance of United States rule."[21] The United States imposed its culture on the Philippines proved to be intensely effective and reinforced the lack of control the Philippines had after its long history of oppression and yearning for independence.

Section 2: Social Impact

As the United States continued to impose its cultural values on the Philippines post-Spanish-American War from 1898 to the signing of the Treaty of Manila denoting

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[18] Schurman, Jacob Gould. *Philippine Affairs: a Retrospect and Outlook; an Address.* New York, C. Scribner's Sons, 1902. Web.. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <leen.loc.gov/02003912>.

[19] Elliott, *The Philippines to the End of the Military Régime*

[20] Also known as the Second Philippine Commission, the Taft Commission was set up by President McKinley to provide recommendations on how the United States should govern the Philippines.

[21] Dolan, Ronald E, and Library of Congress. Federal Research Division. *Philippines: A Country Study.* Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress: For sale by the Supt. of Docs., U.S. G.P.O., 1993. Pdf. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <www.loc.gov/item/92039812/>.

Philippine liberation in 1946, notable reforms within government, education, language, and cultural ideals took place drastically. Written in an excerpt from the Schurman Commission:

> They were impressively voiced by President McKinley, and I have already told you how he set them forth to me three years ago. Our purpose was not selfish, it was humanitarian; it was not the vanity of self-aggrandizement, it was not the greed of power and dominion; no, no, not these, but altruism caring for the happiness of others, philanthropy relieving the Filipinos of oppression and conferring on them the blessings of liberty.[22]

President McKinley and US politicians continued to perpetuate this narrative, citing reasons like "humanitarian" aid and helping Pilipinos on a "path to liberty" as justification for the continued US occupation of the Philippines. US officials repeatedly celebrated American morality and presented idealized images, encouraging Pilipinos to embrace US values so that they, in turn, became more prone to abandoning some of their own. While Americans were portrayed to maintain this positive and glorified image of themselves, Pilipinos were portrayed to maintain the opposite in numerous historical texts. In the book, *The Duty of the American People As to the Philippines.*, Publicola wrote, "By this course there can be retained for the Filipinos that sympathetic adaptation to the mental needs of underdeveloped races, of which the Roman Church has so often demonstrated its peculiar possession; while at the same time means can be found to clear away the mass of corruption and the lust that has gone so far to destroy the value of what good work the Church has done."[23] Pilipinos were portrayed as an inferior race because they were colonized and their culture was viewed as foreign to U.S. ideals. Anything the United States colonized was seen as less than it was. Americans placed themselves on a pedestal because they were the colonizers and not the oppressed.

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[22] Schurman, *Philippine Affairs*, 42.
[23] [Publicola], *The Duty of the American People*, 15.

The lands that the United States colonized were not seen as places where cultures could function by themselves, but rather as cultures that "need aid" in an effort to make them become "civilized." The author emphasized derogatory terms like "sympathetic adaptation" and "mental needs of underdeveloped races" to justify the colonization of Pilipinos. In truth, this piece of evidence revealed how Americans viewed Pilipinos at this time. This portrayal of Pilipinos influenced their self-perception by reinforcing a racial hierarchy that normalized U.S. dominance. Political statements like these helped construct race as a social norm, presenting Pilipino inferiority as legitimate and expected within the confines of colonial discourse. Colonial messaging led many Pilipinos to internalize a sense of cultural inferiority, now known as colonial mentality, as they were repeatedly told that their traditions made them unfit for self-governance.

In addition to this, Dolan wrote, "By 1939, the wealthiest 10 percent of the population received 40 percent of the islands' income. The elite and the cultivators were separated culturally and geographically, and economically… new urban centers rose, often with an Americanized culture."[24] A small portion of the population heavily adopted the shift toward favoring US culture, as demonstrated by their imposed and romanticized ideals of capitalism. This ten percent comprised the wealthiest and most prominent members of Pilipino society, as they had greater access to US-influenced education and economic opportunities. Furthermore, the education system in the Philippines drastically changed as part of the reform efforts to align it with the US colonial agenda. As Shalom and Schirmer noted in *The Philippines Reader: A History of Colonialism, Neocolonialism, Dictatorship, and Resistance.*:

> Thus, from its inception, the educational system of the Philippines was a means of pacifying a people who were defending their newly-won freedom from an invader who had posed as an ally. The education of the Filipino under American sovereignty was an

[24] *Dolan and Library of Congress, Philippines: A Country Study*, 36.

> instrument of colonial policy. The Filipino had to be educated as a good colonial. Young minds had to be shaped to conform to American ideas. Indigenous Filipino ideals were slowly eroded in order to remove the last vestiges of resistance. Education served to attract the people to the new masters and, at the same time, to dilute their nationalism, which had just succeeded in overthrowing a foreign power. The introduction of the American educational system was a subtle means of defeating a triumphant nationalism.[25]

The US government and specialized affiliates, like the Schurman and Taft Commissions, utilized education to impose their ideals and culture on the Pilipinos. A more specific example included implementing English as a restructuring of the curriculum within the Philippine education system.[26] Most notably, the United States reformed the Philippine education system to reflect its ideals, ensuring those values would shape future generations. By implementing their ideals in this way, the United States would be able to have a lasting impact on Philippine culture through means now known as neocolonialism. The authors of this book also wrote:

> The importance of education as a colonial tool was never underestimated by the Americans... The educational system established by the Americans could not have been for the sole purpose of saving the Filipinos from illiteracy and ignorance. Given the economic and political purposes of American occupation, education had to be consistent with these broad purposes of American colonial policy.[27]

Similar to the ideals of the former quote, this piece suggested that the reform of the Philippine education system was utilized as a tool for oppression. By allowing the United States to alter the structure and curriculum, it allows room for exposure to more colonial ideas and less traditional Philippine ideals. This work explicitly said "saving the Filipinos from illiteracy and ignorance," which, from the perspective of Americans, would mean their own, and showed a motive to implement educational reform in the Philippines.

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[25] Shalom, Stephen Rosskamm., and Daniel B. Schirmer. *The Philippines Reader: A History of Colonialism, Neocolonialism, Dictatorship, and Resistance.* South End Press, 1987.[27] Schurman, *Philippine Affairs*, 48.
[26] Schurman, *Philippine Affairs*, 48.
[27] Shalom and Schirmer, *The Philippines Reader*, 46.

Section 3: Pilipino Perspective

Often dominated by white cisgender men in this topic's literature, the overarching narrative of American colonization lacks a Pilipino perspective. Investigating an argument's multiple dimensions is integral in allowing for better understanding, both in breadth and depth of subject matter. As US historian Michael Salman wrote in his book, *The Embarrassment of Slavery: Controversies over Bondage and Nationalism in the American Colonial Philippines*, "The history of Philippine slavery and the nationalists' use of antislavery discourse therefore mark the historic heterogeneity of identity in the Philippine past. They remind us… of the underlying historicity and hybridity of modern Filipino national identity and modern national identity in general."[28] The Pilipino identity is profoundly complex and composite. The Philippine identity is the culmination of nearly 400 years of slavery and oppression from different colonizers, resulting in a profuse blend of cultural influences difficult to simplify. Oppression, as a deeply embedded phenomenon within the Philippine identity, is not one of serendipitous circumstance, but rather intentional deliberation perpetuated by the ecstasy of colonial power and design.

As said in January 1900 by Philippine revolutionary Apolinario Mabini in *A Filipino Appeal to the People of the United States*, "Moreover, the Filipino commissioners in America must have known something of our intentions, and we would not have made it necessary for them to leave that country like escaped criminals, for we would not have had the heart to expose them to the wrath of the American government and its agents."[29] Mabini's words were filled heavily with grief, referencing the US commissioners' departure

[28] Salman, Michael. *The Embarrassment of Slavery: Controversies over Bondage and Nationalism in the American Colonial Philippines.* University of California Press, 2003.
[29] Mabini, Apolinario. "A Filipino Appeal to the People of the United States." *The North American Review* 170, no. 518 (1900): 54–60. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25104936.

comparative to that of "escaped criminals." The intentions of Philippine revolutionaries were not fueled by ambitions seeking war, but rather by the pursuit of Philippine sovereignty and independence, often faced with criminalization and met with state retaliation due to imperial violence. Also written in Mabini's address to the people of the United States:

> The truth is that the Filipino people have never felt disposed to measure their strength with powerful America, otherwise Aguinaldo could not have put up with so many infamous actions at the hands of the American generals. They have always considered themselves little and insignificant beside the American people, for they have always been aware that, even they should gain a few victories, the fortunes of war would necessarily change as soon as reinforcements arrived from America.[30][31]

Mabini's perspective acknowledged a shared cultural sentiment of inferiority and comparative militaristic lackluster to its imperialist counterpart. His disposition to restraint was not born out of submission, but rather that of a sobering realism. Pilipinos were forcefully conditioned to see themselves through the eyes of their colonizers through narratives of worthlessness, illegitimacy, and dependency. Mabini's reflection, which mirrored that of an overarching general self-perception in the Philippines, revealed how centuries-long colonial subjugation became its form of psychological bondage.

In its most raw and irrefutable articulation in Tagalog, national artist and cultural historian Bienvenido Lumbera also wrote:

> Sandaang taon nang naghahari ang imperyalismong Estados Unidos (EU) sa Pilipinas, at sinadya man o hindi, nakipagtulungan tayong mga Filipino sa imperyalista sa pagpapatagal ng kanilang paghahari. Pinahintulutan ng Tratado ng Paris noong 1898 ang pag-angkin ng Amerika sa Pilipinas, at noong 4 Pebrero 1899 tahasang gumamit ng dahas ang mga Amerikano upang kubkubin ang ating bansa. "Insureksiyon" ang tawag ng mga bagong kolonyalista sa paglaban ng mga Filipino at ito ang iginigiit nilang matuwid sa kanilang pamamaslang, pagtortyur at panununog sa lupain ng mga ninuno natin. Ito ang unang hakbang ng imperyalismong EU sa mahabang kasaysayan ng panlilinlang

[30] Mabini, "A Filipino Appeal," 60.

> na bumura sa mga krimen ng mga puwersang militar ng EU sa Pilipinas at nagpalaganap, sa Amerika at sa Pilipinas na rin, ng baluktot na mito ng "benevolent assimilation."[31]

Roughly translated to:

> A hundred years ago, during the United States (US) colonial reign in the Philippines, whether intentionally or not, we Filipinos helped the imperialists in prolonging their domination. The Treaty of Paris of 1898 allowed America to claim the Philippines for itself, and on February 4, 1899, the Americans used violence outright to seize our country. "Insurrection" is what the new colonizers called the Filipino resistance, and this is what insisted their murder, torture, and arson on our ancestral land. This was the first step US imperialism took to a long history of deception by the crimes of the US military forces in the Philippines that spread, both in America and the Philippines, this distorted myth of "benevolent assimilation."[32]

Lumbera critiques benevolent assimilation, a term coined by US President William McKinley to describe the supposed kind of annexation to help the Philippines, as colonial deception. The use of this term sanitized colonial violence, criminalized resistance, and justified US military atrocities as upright moral intervention. The United States saw the Philippines not as a sovereign nation of people, but as a prized Pearl of the Orient[33][34] to feed its crown collection of conquests, which allowed the Philippines to fall victim to the hands of a brutal empire. With these people seen as threats to their ambitions of empire, the classification of these so-called "Insurrectionists" provided legal and moral justification for the subsequent campaign of pacification and "kind" imperial authoritarianism that included the killing, torturing, and burning of Philippine communities.

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[31] Lumbera, Bienvenido. "Edukasyong kolonyal: Sanhi at bunga ng mahabang pagkaalipin." *Mula Tore Patungong Palengke* (2007): 1.

[32] This is the author's translation of Lumbera's original Tagalog text. Some nuances and emotional resonances of the original may be lost in translation, particularly regarding concepts of nationalism, ancestral connection to land, and the specific cultural impact of colonial terminology like "insurrection" versus "resistance." The original piece in Tagalog more forcefully conveys the sense of historical manipulation that shaped Pilipino narratives.

[33] A sobriquet of the Philippines during the Spanish and American colonial periods, originating in the late 19th century to describe the archipelago's beauty and value. The term was later used in American propaganda to romanticize colonial possession of the islands.

Paired with an insatiable appetite for imperialist expansion, the United States utilized systemic violence to perpetuate this manipulated narrative through controlled education systems, carefully curated historical accounts, and propaganda disseminated both in the United States and the Philippines. American schools in the Philippines taught students about the United States' benevolent guidance of a supposedly primitive people, what US President William Howard Taft referred to as "our little brown brothers and sisters."[34] This narrative placed colonizers on ideological pedestals as saviors rather than oppressors. Education was seen as a tool for palatable indoctrination, shaping a carefully crafted predisposition towards how Pilipinos perceived themselves that endured long after the formal end of colonial rule.

Conclusion

The historical discourse surrounding US colonization frequently positions itself within binary narratives, benevolent intervention juxtaposed to exploitative imperialism. This investigation of the central question, "To what extent has the American colonization of the Philippines impacted Pilipinos' perception of their culture following the Spanish-American War to Philippine independence from 1898-1946?" illuminates how colonial power operates not merely through territorial occupation, but through epistemic violence that reconstructs the colonized subject's relationship to their own cultural identity.

The complex legacy of resistance remains deeply ingrained as part of the Pilipino identity following nearly five centuries of colonial subjugation. Through examining historical evidence, this investigation reveals how US imperialism fundamentally disrupted cultural frameworks and self-perception amongst Pilipinos from 1898 to 1946. What emerges from this analysis is not merely a documentation of colonial oppression, but rather that of a critical

[34] [Publicola], *The Duty of the American People.*

interrogation. Ultimately, the extent to which US colonization has impacted Pilipinos perception of their own culture has shown to affect their identities significantly through three interconnected vectors: the strategic deployment of US political power and military force, the comprehensive restructuring of social institutions to reflect imperial values, and the psychological reframing of Pilipino self-perception within a colonial paradigm.

Through this multifaceted imperial project, the United States enacted territorial annexation and a form of cultural conditioning that continues to resonate through the present-day understanding of Pilipino identity. This historical analysis thus contributes to broader discourse by interrogating how imperial power operates simultaneously through explicit violence and subtle manipulation of cultural self-understanding.

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