

Memories of a Dutchman during the Birth of a Nation

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The Philippines through European Lenses:

Late 19th Century Photographs from the Meerkamp van Embden Collection

Otto van den Muijzenberg

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As a History major during my undergraduate years, I was taught that in one historical event, there can be numerous versions and interpretations. Answering the wheres and whens are the easiest, but the whys, hows, and even the whats make the best historians argue among each other. For example, we all know that Mary was in the park yesterday. But did she really buy a balloon? If she bought a red balloon, why not the blue one? Where did she get the money to buy one?

Then the story will get more complicated when we hear the eyewitness accounts, because everybody has a version to tell what Mary did yesterday.

I was reminded of this lesson when I read Otto van den Muijzenberg's book entitled "The Philippines through European Lenses: Late 19th Century Photographs from the Meerkamp van Embden Collection." In this book, van den Muijzenberg compiled the old collection of a Dutch businessman and diplomat of old photographs in the Philippines. He also wrote the contexts of the times and places that the photographs were taken to give the reader a background about the exciting period of 1880s–1920s in the Philippines.

Photographs are often seen as unbiased representations of the past. The places, times, and faces on the photographs are definite and unchanging. The messages that they send to the one who looks is a whole different story.

The Author

Otto van den Muijzenberg collected and presented a selection of photographs shot in the Philippines. He is a Professor Emeritus of Sociology and Modern History of South and Southeast Asia at the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands. He also finished his undergraduate and graduate degrees at the same university (<http://www.assr.nl/scholars/staff/vandenmuijzenberg.html>). He has written, co-

written, and co-edited books about sociology (van den Muijzenberg and Wolters 1988) and Southeast Asia (van den Muijzenberg *et al.* 1982 and Dahles and Muijzenberg 2003). Two of which, including the book being reviewed, are about the Philippines (van den Muijzenberg and van den Muijzenberg 1992; van den Muijzenberg 2008).

In his latest work, he organised a collection of old photographs of the Philippines, accompanied by stories about the man who collected it and the period when the photographs were collected.

Looking through the European's Observations

The main character of van den Muijzenberg's narrative is P. K. A. Meerkamp van Embden. He was a cigar manufacturer and import-exporter in the Philippines for more than 40 years. He was, for a time, the Netherlands' consul in the country. During his stay, he collected a considerable number of photographs shot in the Philippines. Some photographs were bought, some were taken by him, and some were given by friends.

Each photograph shows the different sides of the life of a Dutch expatriate and the mundane or extraordinary things that amused him during his stay in the Philippines. The book is divided into six chapters. Each chapter is accompanied with photographs that best fit the narrations of the author.

The first chapter explains how van den Muijzenberg encountered the photographs at the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies. He discussed how other publications and collections have shown the Philippines in different perspectives. He pointed out how some photographs from the Philippines were taken for anthropology museums and even postcards.

In the second chapter, he introduced Meerkamp van Embden as a scion of a Dutch family engaged in the tobacco business. Meerkamp van Embden came to the Philippines in 1883 as an employee of the Dutch agency Van Polanen Petel y Compañia. This lucrative business allowed Meerkamp van Embden to stay in Manila for a long time.

The author provided a historical background on what was the social, economic, and political state of the Philippines from the late 1800s to the early 1900s. According to the author, he chose to emphasise this period and its photographs because of the political changes the Philippines was

undergoing.

During this time, propagandists and later revolutionaries were active, each having his/her own ideas on how the country should be run. Back then, the Philippines was a colony of Spain and the late 1800s was a period of upheaval for freedom either conditional or immediate. This was also a time when the galleon trade was long forgotten and the tobacco monopoly had ended. Here, foreign tobacco traders, such as Meerkamp van Embden, came to the Philippines to manufacture and export cigars. The Philippines was perfect for Meerkamp van Embden together with the other foreign businessmen for trading. The tobacco plant grows here and the cigar rollers were cheap labour. The country is a neighbour of the Dutch colony Indonesia, where they planted and manufactured more cigars. The cost of living is relatively low. Foreign traders such as them could afford a big house with an army of servants, expensive furniture, and dinnerware, not to mention the capacity to host lavish parties with their fellow expatriates in their beautiful houses found in prime real estates.

Some photographs of important places were shown. Places such as the economic district of Escolta, the busy ports along the Pasig River, and the up and coming expensive residential areas such as Sta. Mesa, Paco, and Pasay were depicted. One can see the landscape of the soon-to-be cities of Metro Manila back when the sites were covered with vegetation with only a few houses. The author reported that Meerkamp van Embden valued the houses near Escolta where he holds his business but later he transferred to the residential area when he had his own family. One can imagine how the social landscape was of Manila before.

The third chapter further discusses Meerkamp van Embden's tobacco business and how the expatriates lived in the Philippines. He lived in a Manila where there were many foreigners engaging in import-export businesses and even productions for local consumption. Meerkamp van Embden mainly interacted with his fellow Europeans and tobacco manufacturers. The book also mentioned some Spanish colonial officials that he interacted with but his photographs mainly featured the non-Spanish European businessmen and their families.

Van den Muijzenberg narrates how these Europeans rented prime real estate and donned their houses with European furniture. He described the parties that they go to from children's birthdays to formal balls. The Europeans' children had also been mentioned in this chapter.

Van den Muijzenberg writes the stories of the son and daughter of

the Meerkamp van Embden household. Their photographs were taken mainly in their garden. One photograph shows a Filipina nanny holding the infant daughter. There was also a photograph of the household staff consisting of coachmen, a gardener, and a cook. All were Filipinos except for the Chinese gardener. This further emphasised how opulent lives the expatriates lived and the roles of Filipinos in their lives.

Another luxurious leisure activity that the foreigners took pleasure in was traveling and hunting. There are many photographs in the book showing the hunting trips and the provinces they have visited. In these, the foreigners' interactions with the Filipinos were very socially stratified. The foreigners were seen as mainly hunters and the Filipinos were the guides when they trekked the densely vegetated forests. Some Filipinos were shown as man-servants who attend to them while lounging. Even outside their homes, working and lower class Filipinos practically attend to all their needs.

While in Chapter Four, van den Muijzenberg chose to show photographs given to Meerkamp van Embden by his friends who traveled in the Cordilleras and the island of Marinduque. In most photographs, you can tell that the local Cordillerans were asked to pose for the camera. Sometimes, they were shown standing in a single file with males and females on each side. In some photographs, the locals were doing their daily activities such as rice-pounding and metal-working. There are also close-up photographs of warriors with their weapons. These are most interesting for me because the photos show their ornaments in detail. Such images can be seen as collection of anthropological data.

In Chapter Five, the author narrated the travels of Meerkamp van Embden and his fellow expatriates to the other islands in the archipelago onboard the ship Uranus. His narration began about the economic importance of abaca fiber. Although Meerkamp van Embden worked as a tobacco manufacturer, van den Muijzenberg managed to collect a number of photographs showing the processing of abaca fibers. Back then, the Philippines particularly the Bicol region was a source of these fibers used for making good rope. Meerkamp van Embden might have collected these for an economic report for his government or maybe as documentation for future business ventures.

Meerkamp van Embden have also visited the islands of Romblon, Cebu, Leyte, and Samar. He had reached Surigao where "some of the best hemp is pressed" (p. 237). He also visited the hemp plantations in

Camiguin island. Later, they visited Misamis, Bohol, and Iloilo. These travels happened from 1884 to 1894.

After 1894, a lot have changed in the political climate of the Spanish colony. As seen in Chapter Six, van den Muijzenberg tackled what he called as the "Revolutionary Times." Although Meerkamp van Embden left the country in 1896, he managed to collect photographs during the war against the Spanish. He came back in time to witness the war against the Americans.

Meerkamp van Embden's photographs about the Philippine-American war were few but important. A photo shows the entry of the then leader of the revolution General Emilio Aguinaldo. There are photographs of sunken war ships and even war prisoners. As we can see, this period was very pivotal in the birth of the Philippine nation. According to van den Muijzenberg, foreigners such as Meerkamp van Embden stayed away from all the fighting and shared neither opinion nor chose sides. They chose to stand behind the fighting lines, and just observed for it did not matter which side would win. The most important thing was to have good relations with the winner for future business ventures. Such actless participation was seen in the photographs just showing the aftermath of war and never the "action shots."

Looking at the European Observer

Van den Muijzenberg managed to organise the photographs and create a narrative to go with it. This is not an easy task for the nature of the photographs was disarranged and sometimes neither date nor caption was written on some of them. He actually researched when and where the photographs were taken. His background information about the photographs' subjects were helpful in visualising the period when they were taken.

He effectively narrated the Dutchman's life as a businessman and a European in the Philippines. Van den Muijzenberg clearly depicted the Dutch companies, and their household up to the vacations they took in the Philippines. He even mentioned the small role of Meerkamp van Embden during the revolution but adequately narrated the aims and events anyway of the Filipino Revolution for the reader's comprehension. It is commendable that the author clearly, although briefly, mentioned the 1896 Revolution up to the 1898 Declaration of Independence.

The European's Life

One can read many information about the dealings of the European company owners in the Philippines when one reads this book. From tobacco, hemp, and even liquor, there are well-researched write-ups about the foremost European businesses in this book.

One can also understand how these Europeans lived along with their families. I have felt that most of these foreigners very seldom interact with the locals and even the Spaniards unless in official and business terms. It can be seen in the photographs that there are only two kinds of Filipinos in the European's life: household staff and local officials. The Spaniards, on the other hand, were mere colonial officials.

Their Influence

The lack of interaction between Filipinos and non-Spanish Europeans can be seen through the Filipinos' cultural and political life. There are very few influences of the non-Spanish kind. Their main influence was mainly economic. As seen in the photographs, there is one obvious social change they have caused. When Meerkamp van Embden's cigar factory was operating, the cigar rollers were mainly local women. We do know that before the cigar factories, women do help around the fields, manufacture products such as pots and cloth, and sell food and different articles (e.g. betel chew, fish, and vegetables). These were small in scale compared to the lines and lines of women in a factory rolling cigars together with their daughters. This is quite a change in those times that the historian Luisa Camagay (1995) have studied and seen this period as an important time in studying the history of women in the Philippines. Although van den Muijzenberg did not stress this, he actually supplied information about the state of women cigar rollers back then.

In terms of employer-employee relationships in the cigar factory, there is a high probability that there was little interaction. The Europeans relay their commands through a few educated Filipinos who can communicate with the factory workers from the rollers to the mechanics (p. 82-83). One famous example of this is Andres Bonifacio who worked for an English company in Manila. Bonifacio was able to communicate in English, which was self-taught (Agoncillo 1956).

Seeing the photographs on pages 82 and 83 remind me how the Dutch controlled Indonesia through the local leaders. This resulted into a few influences of the Dutch to the Indonesians who largely retained their

Islam faith. This was the opposite to the Filipinos under Spain where majority of the locals converted to Christianity. This shows in the photographs of Meerkamp van Embden, where Filipinos dress in more conservative garbs compared to the ones who still practice the indigenous religion.

The Filipinos' roles in the Europeans' Lives

Like the Americans, the Europeans took some photographs for anthropological purposes. The photographs about the Cordillerans were testaments to this. There, male, female, adult, and child "specimens" were closely photographed, complete with ornaments and some in action doing their daily chores. The warriors were also photographed. Because Meerkamp van Embden did not photograph the locals, it is probable that some of Meerkamp van Embden's friends were interested in studying the locals. Such interest can be seen in the Museum of Ethnology in Leiden, the Netherlands, where many Philippine artefacts are currently stored (van den Muijzenberg 2008).

Adding to this view, there are the mountain guides, nannies, clerks, cooks, and coachmen that are represented in the photographs. The only upperclass Filipinos represented are the local *gobnadorcillos* in the provinces that they have visited. During the Revolution, they began to see the Filipinos as fighters until the Philippine-American war. These images are represented in the photographs in Chapter Six.

What about the Philippines as an archipelago? How was the colony represented?

Photographs portraying landscapes, houses, and buildings are quite entertaining to see, especially now that time has changed these places. Meerkamp van Embden did collect a lot of these photographs. He managed to have old pictures of Escolta and Ermita which are still commercial areas. Places such as Pasay, Paco, and Parañaque were inhabited by a few families mostly residing in *bahay kubos*. There are also photographs of beaches, ports, and forts.

These photographs are very "neutral" and can be conceived as for reporting purposes to the mother country. Meerkamp van Embden had very few photographs of forts which lessen the probability of using it for military intelligence, or so I thought.

Basically, these photographs say "This is the Philippines" according

to Meerkamp van Embden. This is the Philippines he knew. It looks like the Philippines is just an archipelago with islands suitable for money-making ventures based on the photographs that van den Muijzenberg published.

Conclusion

All in all, van den Muijzenberg presented the photographs well. The background historical narrative was sufficient. Readers who have no information about the Philippines' colonial history will not be lost when reading the book. He also clearly illustrated the life of the Europeans in the Philippines which was rarely studied.

This work added more information about the role of Europeans in the Philippines' economic colonial history. This book is a big contribution in studying a part of the Philippines' history often overlooked by most. He also imparted the European observers' views about the Philippine Revolution. This supplied a third person's point of view about a very important part of Filipino history. Van den Muijzenberg successfully presented the views of the European eyewitnesses and gave a fresh look in the Filipinos' past.

Filipinos have continuously discussed and restudied their history. Historical sources are continuously read and re-read to know *what* really happened in the past. The European perspective adds more insights in the endless but exciting discussions about what really happened in the past.

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A Lemery Archaeological Sequence

Cecilia Y. Locsin, Maria Isabel G. Ongpin, and Socorro Paz P. Paterno
2008. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press

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As a finished product of an excavation that closed during the 1970's, it is needless to enumerate the importance of this book. It is a very welcomed study on the archaeological excavation done in Ayao-Iyao, Lemery, Batangas, Philippines. The site report, much like the excavation, is a complete analysis of the cultural sequence that occurred within the site. It is available from the Ateneo de Manila University Press, and is the collaborative effort based on the separate masters theses of the three authors: Cecilia Y. Locsin, Maria Isabel G. Ongpin, and Socorro Paz P. Paterno. The book is available in both hardbound and paperback editions.

The foreword is presented by Dr. Wilhelm G. Solheim, one of the leading pottery experts whose expertise ranges from the Neolithic to the Metal Age in Southeast Asia, including the Philippines. In the Introduction, which in itself is an important part of the book, the authors explain the lengthy analysis, writing, and publication processes.

The first chapter deals with the current literature used throughout the study. It is, perhaps, one of the most important parts of the book that, unfortunately, falls flat with regards to simplified and unexhausted sources that the authors used. The publications used regarding the archaeological studies, at most, ended at around 1978. This is an oversight that sets the framework for the entire read: the possibility of out-of-date information that will require the readers to find other updated reports. This includes using the so-called Tasaday community (that allegedly only uses stone tools and sticks as their primary technology) without the benefit of a brief discussion regarding the possibility of deception. (For an elaborate