

THE POLITICAL PROCESS INVOLVED IN THE FOUNDING OF TOWNS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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In all of the areas that came under Spanish control, whether it be in the Tagalog region or in the Visayas, in the Ilocano north or in the Bicol south, or even in northern Mindanao, there is found a poblacion-complex in every municipality erected during the Spanish regime. The poblacion-complex is so common it has been taken for granted as something that is part of the landscape. But the emergence of the poblacion is one of the major social changes that was a consequence of Spanish rule and of the introduction and spread of Christianity. Or conversely, it might instead be said that the implantation of Christianity in those areas that came under Hispanic rule was a consequence of the resettlement of the people in *poblaciones*.

The Spanish policy of "bringing the people under the bells" involved the process of resettling the pre-hispanic dispersed clusters of habitants in compact urban villages around a church and government house. This was intended to facilitate spiritual and civil administration. Thus, in the first two centuries of Spanish rule, the regime took the initiative in persuading the people to resettle around designated village centers, then called *cabeceras*, which later became the *poblaciones*.

At the beginning of the 19th century, the initiative for the building of these *poblaciones* appears to have already shifted to the native society, at least it so appears in archival records pertaining to Pangasinan. Whereas in the first century of Spanish rule the natives had resented and only grudgingly acquiesced in resettlement, in the 19th century, the records show that the people under the native elite took the initiative in constructing a new poblacion and then applying for recognition as an independent *pueblo*.

The building of new towns in the 19th century was a consequence of the population explosion that started in the second

half of the 18th century. The Dutch Wars were over and the Moro slave raids of the seventeenth century had been suppressed. Despite the revolts and the consequent loss of life that occurred during the British Occupation of Manila in 1762-64, the Philippine population almost doubled in the period between 1735 and 1799, from 837,180 to 1,576,865. And in another fifty years, the population again doubled, to 3,815,380 in 1850.¹

Long-settled areas such as the Ilocos coast and Pampanga, the Laguna de Bay region, Cebu, northern Pangasinan and southeastern Panay soon reached a saturation point in the man-land ratio. The growth of the population led to the expansion of the Filipinos into the interior virgin flatlands. The forests of the interior lowlands disappeared, giving way to new settlements and cultivated farm lands. New towns were founded and the dominance of lowland Christian culture was firmly entrenched. This paper will focus on the process involved in the founding of those new towns, using the area of Pangasinan as the locale, based on archival records denominated *Erecciones del pueblos*.

The oldest towns of Pangasinan built in the first century of Spanish rule were erected out of the most populous settlements existing at the time of the conquest. The Pangasinanes then occupied the coastal areas and the central plain of the province. These towns were either lined along the coast of Lingayen Gulf or were strung along the Agno river and its tributaries on the central plain of Pangasinan. In the 18th century, new towns were carved out of the jurisdictions of the older towns.

In the 19th century, migrations from the North changed the population complexion of the province. Ilocano families sought new homes wherever there were still vacant and unoccupied lands, and many found them in the western and the eastern regions of Pangasinan. The new towns founded on the western frontiers of the province, such as Sual, Aguila and Mangataram, received significant numbers of Ilocano migrants.

In the eastern region of Pangasinan, there were even more immense tracts of uncultivated land than in the west, stretching east from the towns of San Jacinto and Manacag to the foothills of the mountains of Benguet and the Cordilleras. These would be filled

up by Ilocano migrants and several new towns would spring up in this region. Among these would be the towns of Urdaneta, Pozorrbio, Binalonan, Alcala, and Santa Maria.

THE POLITICAL PROCESS

The first step in the political process of founding a new *pueblo* was the application for a license to erect a *visita*. A *visita* was a settlement, independent in civil administration but dependent on a mother town-parish for its spiritual administration. But the license for a *visita* was not applied for until and unless enough families had already been settled around a proposed town center with the following structures already constructed: a chapel, parochial house, *casa tribunal*, and, in the latter half of the 19th century, a school house as well.

The petitioners usually alleged the following: (1) that their village was so distant from the mother town that they had great difficulty fulfilling their spiritual obligations with great detriment to their souls; (2) that many babies and sick persons died without being baptized or receiving the last sacraments of the Church because of the lack of a spiritual pastor; (3) that many crimes against persons and property were committed and went unpunished because of the lack of civil officials who could maintain law and order and administer justice; (4) that the settlement had enough land and water for agriculture; and finally, (5) that they had already constructed the necessary public structures such as the *casa tribunal*, the church, and the *casa parroquial*. Therefore, the petition prayed for recognition as an independent municipality so they could obtain the blessings of civil and spiritual government.

The petition for the license was usually made by the *gobernadorcillo* and the *comun de principales* of the mother town, or the nearest adjoining town. The petition was endorsed by the parish curate and addressed to the *Alcalde Mayor* or the *Señor Gobernador* of the province. If the petition had not been signed by any of these local officials, the matter was certain to be referred to those local officials by the *Alcalde Mayor* for their comment and verification. If the application was sent direct to the Superior Government in Manila, as sometimes happened, it was certain to be referred to the provincial governor for his comment and veri-

fication. The provincial governor, in turn, was certain to refer the matter to the local officials, the *gobnadorcillo* or town head and the *comun de principales* or town council. The process of evaluating a petition for a new municipality was, therefore, facilitated if the petition was made by the town chief and the town officials of the mother town or an adjacent town. As Phelan had observed, Spanish imperialism was not only theocratic but was profoundly bureaucratic as well.³

The provincial governor verified the merits of the petition by consulting the local officials and the parish curates of adjoining towns, or by sending a representative to make an ocular inspection, or both. The endorsement or the opposition of any of the local officials mentioned had either a favorable or unfavorable effect on the progress of the petition. When the provincial governor was finally convinced that the petition was meritorious, he forwarded the petition to the Superior Government at Manila, reiterating all the arguments made by the petitioners and recommending favorable action.

In the evaluation of the petition, certain requisites had to be met — economic, ecological, demographic, and evidence of a social-institutional setting that would meet the needs of the community.

Within the economic dimension, the proposed municipality must have enough land available and enough sources of water within its jurisdiction, both for farming purposes and for the pasture of animals, to support a growing population. The proposed site of the poblacion must also take into consideration topography and ecology. It must not be subject to floods and it must be sufficiently distant from other towns to allow room for growth. On the demographic side, the population must have grown sufficiently large to provide a minimum of five hundred (500) tributes. This was the number deemed necessary to support the fiscal needs of a municipality, particularly the stipend of a parish priest. Finally, the community must have already constructed the public structures that would provide a setting for their political and religious activities.

In the first half of the 19th century, it was the *Juzgado Go-bierno*, equivalent to the Department of Justice now, that evaluated

the application for the creation of a new municipality and monitored the papers through the various departments of the government. The opinions of the following were sought: the Fiscal of the Audiencia, similar in functions to the Solicitor General today; the officials of the Royal Treasury or the Department of Finance today; and the ecclesiastical authorities, specifically, the Bishop of Nueva Segovia and the Prelate Provincial of the Dominican Order, under whose spiritual jurisdiction the province of Pangasinan fell. If all these high civil and religious officials agreed that all requisites had been met, then the way was made clear for the creation of the new municipality. If at any point it was pointed out that a certain requisite had not been fulfilled, then the papers went back to the provincial governor for verification or clarification. In turn the provincial governor endorsed the papers to the petitioners. Often, the officials of the Royal Treasury sought to be satisfied that the number of tributary families leaving the mother town to compose the new town would not be to the prejudice and detriment of the mother town. These doubts were resolved by the submission of the *padrones* or tributary registers of the *cabeceras* that would compose the new town by the *Cabezas* concerned. This, in fact, happened in the founding of the Town of Alcala. The *cabeceras* concerned were required to submit their registry lists. Only when all doubts had been dispelled regarding the viability of the new municipality and the stability of the mother town was assured was the decree prepared for the signature of His Excellency, the Governor and Captain General.

THE CREATION OF THE NEW MUNICIPALITY

The royal decree creating the new municipality also followed a certain pattern. First, it provided for the marking of the town center, the sites of the town plaza, the church, the *casa tribunal* or municipal hall, the parochial house of the priest, and the school house.

Second, it provided for how much terrain should be allowed to the new municipality, varying from one to two leagues, or about five or six to ten kilometers of terrain, measured from the center of the town in every direction of the compass. This center of the town was marked by the erection of a wooden cross in the middle of the town plaza, usually fronting the church door. Such a wooden

cross on a concrete base is still found in the town of San Carlos (now a city), Pangasinan today.

Third, the decree directed the assignment of farm lots and proportional home sites to the residents for their use and specifically provided that such lands were for the use and usufruct of the residents alone, that such could not be alienated, sold, or mortgaged, and that if the resident abandoned such lands, such was to revert to the municipality, to be reassigned to another cultivator.

The decree also gave instructions on the layout of the streets, on the distance to be observed between houses, on the planting of trees between houses to preserve the ecological balance and also to prevent the spread of fire should this occur. Certainly, these provisions show how enlightened Spanish colonial policy was with respect to human settlements.

THE INAUGURATION OF THE NEW TOWN

The final step was the implementation of the provisions of the royal edict creating the new municipality. The *Alcalde Mayor* or his authorized representative presided over the inauguration of the new *pueblo*. With the *principales* of the mother town and all the other adjoining towns, headed by their respective *gobernadorcillos*, *cabezas ancianos* and *capitanes pasados* as witnesses to the occasion, the *Alcalde Mayor* supervised the operations of marking the town center, the town plaza, and the sites for the *casa tribunal*, the church, the parochial house, and the school house, laying out the streets, and setting the boundary limits.

The setting of jurisdictional limits and implantation of *mojones* or markers were usually entrusted to the governor's assistants, known as the *Auxiliares de Fomento*. Each operation was witnessed by the respective officials of the new town and the adjacent town concerned, and the record was signed and countersigned by the participating officials: the *gobernadorcillo*, the *cabezas* and the *capitanes pasados*. The whole record of the proceedings, called the *Acta de Deslindes y Amojonamiento*, was signed by the participating officials: the *gobernadorcillo*, the *Escribano Publico* of the Court of First Instance of the province. The original document was then submitted to the Superior Govern-

ment for approval and safekeeping in the archives. Each town was furnished a certified copy by the Notary Public to preclude future disputes and controversies, especially with regard to boundaries.

The election of new town officials followed and these were inducted into office by the *Alcalde Mayor* or provincial governor. Thus the new settlement gained political recognition as a civil municipality. The creation of the town as a parish did not always accompany the founding of the municipality. It awaited the availability of Dominican personnel. Sometimes, the Dominican Provincial Prelate would require that the new town construct its religious structures of solid and enduring materials before consenting to establish the curacy. Until the town was assigned its own curate, it remained a *visita* under the spiritual administration of its mother parish. Even then, the spiritual needs of the community were not neglected for a *coadjutor* could always be assigned to the new town from the mother parish. When it was finally assigned its own Vicar, then and only then did the town come of age, a *pueblo-parrocco* or a town-parish.⁵

THE ROLE OF THE PRINCIPALIA

The role of the *principalia* or the native elite in the founding of the new towns cannot be overlooked. The *principales* played an active role. They led the participants at all stages of the unfolding drama. The initial task of building the *poblacion*, the assigning of residential lots, urging the families to build the chapel and their houses within the *poblacion* to live "under the bell"—all these required leadership and the *principales*, specifically the *cabezas de barangay* or heads of the *cabeceras* that would compose the new town, furnished that leadership.

The incorporation of the native elite at the lowest level of the Spanish colonial administration introduced them not only to the forms, structures, and functions of the Spanish political system but also to all that was covered by the system of Roman law. The elite learned to frame and couch petitions in elegant Spanish phrases of respect and humble submission, to present these properly to the *Señor Gobernador* of the province, and to hire *apoderados* or persons with power of attorney, to see their

petitions through the labyrinthine passages of the Spanish bureaucracy in Manila to a successful conclusion. If there was a snag, they renewed their appeals, furnishing whatever proofs or documents were still necessary. They learned to make affidavits with the necessary number of witnesses and make use of Spanish law and legal procedures. They learned the value of written documents, of keeping records in their archives for future litigations, as in boundary disputes. In a boundary dispute between the towns of Mangaldan and San Fabian in 1818, the litigants cited the documents in their local archives.⁶ At least throughout the Spanish regime, those *casa reales*, *casa tribunales* and *conventos* must have kept their records. It is very unfortunate that none of these local archives have survived the changes in regimes.

The growth of new towns in the 19th century was given impetus by the influx of Ilocano migrants into western and eastern Pangasinan. There were controversies attending the socio-political process in the founding of some towns in eastern Pangasinan, specifically in the founding of Binalonan and Santa Maria. These controversies give a hint as to the tensions generated between competing Pangasinan and Ilocano elites. However, these competing political factions resorted to legal measures in resolving their conflicts, and in so doing, demonstrated their growing political maturity.

NOTES

¹ For early census summaries, see U.S. Bureau of Census, *Census of the Philippines Taken under the Philippine Commission, 1903*, Washington, D.C., 1905. Vol. 2, p. 18.

² See this writer's doctoral dissertation, "Pangasinan, 1801-1900: A Politico-Economic and Social History," University of the Philippines Graduate School, 1979. Chapter 4 & 5.

³ *The Hispanization of the Philippines Spanish Aims and Filipino Responses, 1565-1700*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1959.

⁴ "Pangasinan, 1801-1900," *loc. cit.*, pp. 260-305.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 125-161.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 34-353.