

The Japanese Presence in Davao¹

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As far as I know, there is no known Japanese presence in the Davao region during pre-Hispanic times. The very few archeological diggings around southern Davao and southeastern Mindanao have yielded ancient indigenous pottery of the Sa-Huyn-Kalanay tradition (Solheim, Legaspi, and Neri, SJ 1979) and Chinese ceramics (Blair and Robertson 1973, 68-69; Junker 2000), but no Japanese artifacts.² When the Spaniards began to explore the Davao area, they took note that the Mandaya tribe living along the Pacific coast tended to have a lighter complexion than the interior tribes (Schreurs 1989, 47). To account for this, they speculated that the Dutch or the Japanese might have intermarried with the local tribes.

Majul (1973, 20) includes the Japanese among foreigners who traded with the Sulu Sultanate, and Spanish chroniclers of the 1600s mention Japanese presence in Luzon and the Visayas. Indeed the Japanese have long been present in the Philippines; these were traders, pirates,³ and Japanese Christian refugees after the Shimabara Rebellion of 1637-1638.⁴ As Davao was conquered by the Spaniards only in 1848 or 163 years ago,⁵ there's still a big gap in Davao history prior to that period. Japan forbade its people from going abroad from 1635 to the 1850s, so the likelihood of Japanese presence here in Davao within the seclusion period would be nil. Prior to its conquest by the Spaniards, the Davao Gulf region was under the control of the Magindanaw Sultanate based in Cotabato, with the eastern part of the Gulf under the control of the Davao Kalagan Moros.⁶

For fifty years under Spanish rule, Davao developed very slowly. When the Philippine Revolution broke out in 1898, the Spaniards were still trying to pacify the different tribes or *Lumads* of Davao.⁷ The Spanish priests were in the forefront of the pacification campaign by trying to convert the natives and putting them in reductions or compact settlements. But as soon as the priests and the soldiers left,

the natives would run away to the forests as they resented being made to work and to pay tribute to the Spaniards.

Very few settlers, including Spaniards, wanted to settle in Davao. It was so isolated that it became a penal colony without walls or barbed wires, becoming the dumping ground of deserters and various kinds of offenders from the other parts of the Philippines. One curious scene occurred in 1861 when a ship arrived in Davao carrying prisoners who were in leg irons. As soon as they landed in Davao, the prisoners were released and given firearms by the Spaniards (Tiu 2005, 221)!

But even during this period, Davao was already noted for the richness of its soil and the abundance of its natural resources. In 1893, the Spanish Jesuit priest, Fr. Saturnino Urios, predicted that one day Davao would be the best province in Mindanao, praising it for the

fertility of its soil, the health enjoyed by one living here, and the variety of resources of land and sea open to anyone to earn a living —tortoise shells, sea cucumber, and abundant fish in the sea; high priced fruits in the forest; soil right for cacao, abaca, and coffee (Arcilla 1998, 12).

Apart from the Spaniards, the only foreigners present in Davao were a handful of Chinese traders and one Syrian (today properly identified as the Lebanese Juan Awad). There is no mention of any Japanese, although by 1868, the Japanese were already allowed to go out of the country, with the first migrants going to Hawaii.⁸ The few Spaniards in Davao set up trading posts and started to develop abaca plantations in 1882 (Hayase 1984). But due to lack of labor, the abaca rotted in the fields.⁹ The Spaniards could not make the local tribesmen or Lumads work. They were seminomadic slash-and-burn farmers who could get everything they wanted from the forests, rivers, and the sea. “The forest is our *palengke* or market,” as the Lumads would say.¹⁰ And everything was for free. This refusal to work by the Lumads was the reason why the Japanese got involved in Davao history.

When American occupation troops arrived in Davao in 1899, they were amazed at the richness of Davao soil.¹¹ One of them, James Burchfield immediately purchased land around Toril in 1901 to transform it into an abaca plantation even before being discharged from the army. This was how he described Davao upon his arrival (Gleeck 1983, cited in Tiu 2003, 48):

We saw soil ten feet deep, rich volcanic ash land that would grow anything that could be grown in the tropics. We saw a land well

watered, a big region all around the Gulf with streams frequent as deer paths.

With the Americans getting involved in abaca plantations, the labor shortage became more acute. The American planters tried to induce the mountain natives to come down to the coast with little success. The planters were so desperate they recruited labor from the other parts of the Philippines. It so happened that Japanese workers who had worked in the construction of Kennon Road in Mountain Province were now out of work after their contract. A Japanese merchant based in Manila named Ohta Kyozauro negotiated with planter Juan Awad to bring them to Davao. The first batch of Japanese workers numbering twenty-three arrived in Davao in 1903. A lot of them did not want to come because they had heard of the bad working conditions. They had been promised six Mexican dollars a day, but it turned out they would only be paid one Mexican dollar a day.¹²

In 1905, 154 Japanese workers arrived in Davao, displacing the Spaniards as the biggest foreign group in Davao. The Americans numbered thirty-four. For the first time, we see the presence of Bisayan laborers numbering 300 (Tiu 2003, 92). The Americans were truly intent on developing Davao. In fact, there were Americans who wanted to detach Mindanao from the rest of the Philippines—they started calling it a “white man’s country.”¹³ As for Davao, they called it “the garden of the gods.” This was how Davao was described in 1905 in a Zamboanga newspaper (Tiu 2003, 56):

Natural beauty of land and sea, the gentle slopes and the steep forest-covered hillsides, the native jungle untouched as yet by axe or bolo... Many hardships to be sure, are now to be found in traveling through this farthest American frontier, with no roads nor hotels nor telegraph lines. But the time is coming when bad roads will give place to good ones, jungle will be changed to broad fields producing hemp, copra or rubber and steamers will ply between the port of the gulf instead of crude sailing craft one sees today.

Such powerful advertisements lured more Americans to Davao. Some 200 former soldiers and teachers (the Thomasites) would come to establish plantations, making Davao the most Americanized town in the country. As the entire Gulf was transformed into huge plantations, Lumad resentment grew. In 1906, a Lumad rebellion occurred in which the Davao District politico-military governor himself, Lieutenant Edward C. Bolton was killed by the Manobo leader

Mangulayon in Malita, Davao del Sur. American troops retaliated with a massive *huwes de kutsilyo* or scorched earth operations to contain the Lumad rebellion. In their investigation, the American officials blamed "a system of peonage or slavery" in the plantations as the main reason why the natives rebelled. It will be recalled that the Lumads did not like to work. Many of them were rounded up to work in the plantations where they were subjected to many kinds of abuses and ill-treatment.

As the Lumads were an unreliable source of labor, the Americans continued to recruit Bisayan labor and to allow the importation of more Japanese workers. Most of the early Japanese laborers came from Okinawa and Fukushima prefectures. Unlike the Chinese who were barred from immigrating to the United States of America (USA) starting in 1882,¹⁴ the Japanese were only restricted from going to the USA mainland in 1900.¹⁵ The restriction did not mention Hawaii or the Philippines, and that loophole allowed the American planters to recruit Japanese labor.¹⁶ Some American officials took a rather negative view of the first Japanese workers in Davao. Here is what Moro Province Governor Leonard Wood wrote in 1906 about the Japanese in Davao (Tiu 2003, 66):

(T)hey have not proved desirable settlers, and are not regarded with favor by the natives or whites. Removal from their own country with its traditional constraints has operated to make them a rather restless and undesirable element in the community. They do not appear to be especially anxious to work. This condition of affairs has been a great disappointment to the planters, who had expected to find among these people a most desirable class of labor.

But Wood's first impressions would be proven wrong, as the Japanese would turn out to be the most efficient and productive workers who would eclipse the Americans as the leading planters of abaca in Davao in a matter of ten years. In 1906, Ohta Kyozauro set up his own plantation in Bago and Daliao. The following year, in 1907, he set up his own Ohta Development Company, whereupon the Japanese working in other plantations transferred to him. In 1914, another corporation, the Furukawa Plantation Company was set up with Furukawa Yoshizo and Ito Kotaro¹⁷ as principal stockholders. More corporations would be set up as the abaca industry boomed.

Some of Ohta's associates were: Yanagahira Takato, Oshiro Kozo, Inoue Naotaro, and Morokuma Yasku, most of whom worked on the

Benguet Road. The other early Japanese workers or capitalists were Agari Ichisuke, Akamine Kamejiro, Akamine Saburo, Enomoto Eisichi, Fujiwara Yoshito, Kojiro Uishi, and Mikami Takanaga. Some of the workers came at a very early age. Akamine Saburo was fourteen while Oshiro Kozo was nineteen when they came to the Philippines.

The Japanese corporations developed the *jieisha* (farmer) or *pakyaw* arrangement with the Japanese workers in which the Japanese workers became more or less self-sufficient farmers. The farmers would sign a grower's contract with a corporation who would give them land to work on, hire Filipinos or use family labor to clear the land, plant it with abaca, and administer it for ten to fifteen years. They sold their harvest to the corporation, received 95 percent of the profit and paid back 5 percent of their harvest to the corporation (Abinales 2000, 84). Another arrangement is with the native landowner. The Japanese would shoulder all costs of production and pay the native landowner a percentage of the harvest of between 10 and 15 percent depending on the state of development of the land. There seems to have been some variations of this arrangement but it apparently made all parties happy, particularly the Japanese workers who became self-sufficient farmers. Through discipline and good management practices, they would become the leading abaca planters by 1918, with seventy-one plantations against the American's thirty-four. In land area, the Japanese controlled 55,906 hectares, the Americans 20,129 hectares, and the Filipinos 15,624 hectares. In 1918, the Japanese population stood at 5,612, of which around 200 were women, including children and seventy prostitutes (Hayase 1984).

The abaca industry underwent boom and bust cycles, but the Japanese stayed on, with the years between 1918 and 1921 recording the fastest land expansion by the Japanese. They were able to compete successfully with the Americans despite discriminatory land laws that restricted or barred Japanese ownership or leasehold of the land.¹⁸ The American planters could no longer develop their plantations after their initial enthusiasm. They had come because an acre or one-fourth a hectare earned USD 50 (PhP 60), which was unheard of in the US (Tiu 2003, 90). By just investing one-third of their salary to develop lands in Davao for five years, the American government employees would become independent for life. That was the arithmetic that drew many Americans to Davao. But encountering labor, production, and marketing problems, many American planters simply gave up. Many of

the American plantations were owned by partnerships in which some members would work full-time in government and send the money to their partners who managed the plantation. They could not attract big investors as the land limit of 1,024 hectares per corporation prevented an economy of scale. A lot of the American planters sold out to the Japanese. Burchfield, the first American planter, sold his plantation to the Furukawa Company in 1914. In 1917, more American planters on the east coast of the Gulf sold out to the Japanese. By 1928, only twenty-four plantations were American, one was Spanish, thirteen Chinese, sixty-two Japanese, and 106 Filipino (Hartley 1983, 82).

Japanese penetration into tribal territory also roused Lumad resentment. According to Vicente Mori, a mestizo Japanese-Bagobo, the Bagobos were angry because wildlife became scarce, reducing their source of livelihood. So when a tree was being cut down, the Bagobos would shoot the Japanese as the tree fell, and nobody would hear the shot (Tiu 2003, 139). There were 100 Japanese killed in Davao between 1918 and 1921; by 1938, the number reached 600 (Hayase 1984, 257). The Philippine Constabulary periodically launched campaigns to confiscate the guns and knives of the Bagobos.

But, of course, there was also another side to Japanese-Lumad relationship. The first recorded intermarriage between the two cultures involved a Japanese by the name of Kawata and a Bagoba by the name of Umbata in 1908. Many such marriages and live-in arrangements would become common, with Davao having 64 percent of 4,836 Japanese descendants or *Nikkei-jin* in Mindanao today (Palacio 2010).

Indeed, the Japanese had become deeply entrenched in Davao, with a consulate representing their interests. They did not only control the abaca industry, they also dominated the timber industry and half of the coconut industry (Magdalena 2007). They had their own schools, hospitals, clinics, newspapers, banks, and stores selling Japanese food and drinks.¹⁹ They were the largest taxpayers in the province. On their own, the Japanese had built 450 kilometers of road, compared to fifty kilometers by the government in a span of twenty years. These roads are still being used today.

By 1929, the Americans would concede that Davao's progress was "due largely to the very progressive methods and splendid organization of the Japanese planters there."²⁰ After a visit to Davao in 1932, Governor General Theodore Roosevelt would comment that the Japanese dominated the commerce and agriculture of

Davao because of "sheer demonstrated efficiency" (Magdalena 2007). During this period, Davao Gulf had become a Japanese lake, with most ships entering Davao being Japanese-owned. A Japanese trade map would mark Davao as part of the Japanese domestic route (Abinales 2000). The Japanese success is credited mostly to the *jeisha* system. In 1935, there were 3,602 *jeishas* working in both Japanese and Filipino plantations.

In the meantime, land-starved Cebuanos who had been trickling into Davao since the early 1900s were now coming in droves. Starting in 1934, 10,000 Cebuanos were coming to Davao annually, attracted by the promise of employment, land, and ownership of land. Almost 40 percent of them, estimated at up to 40,000, worked in Japanese plantations and other Japanese businesses (Abinales 2000, 122). Today, surviving old Bisaya workers generally have kind words for their Japanese bosses (Tiu 2005, 125-136). By 1939, Bisaya (Cebuano) speakers had become the majority ethnic group, constituting more than 50 percent of the population of Davao. It was a trend that would continue for the following decades so that today Cebuanos constitute more than 90 percent of Davao population.

The Spaniards and the Americans had predicted that Davao would become a boom town. But it was the Japanese who made that a reality by transforming the garden of the gods into a highly productive plantation economy. However, their presence in Davao would soon become a serious concern to the American colonial authorities because on the Asian stage, the Japanese were successfully competing with Western colonial powers such as France, Britain, and Russia in dividing and redividing China and surrounding territories. Japan had embarked on a program of rapid modernization after it was forcibly opened by the US in 1854. In 1872, it annexed the Ryukyus; in 1895, it annexed Formosa and made Korea a protectorate. In 1905, the year that Japan defeated Russia in the fight for Port Arthur (now Dalian), the Americans and the Japanese forged an informal agreement whereby the US would recognize Japanese interests in Korea, and in return, Japan would recognize US interests in the Philippines (Esthus 1959, 46-51). In 1910, Japan annexed Korea. It should be emphasized that it was not only Japan that was annexing territories. The other Western powers were also busy expanding their territories in Asia.²¹

In 1931, Japan invaded Manchuria and set up *Machukuo*. Davao was soon being called *Dabao-kuo*. The American colonial government

viewed it with concern as Japan was clearly going on an expansionist path and disturbing the balance of power in the region. The Americans were now looking closely at the Japanese dominance in Davao at a time when the Philippines had become a commonwealth. In 1935, the Philippine Government made the pakyaw system illegal. Some local officials began to denounce the absolute economic and political hold of the Japanese on Davao. To counteract this control, the capital town Davao and the municipal district of Guianga where the Japanese were concentrated were combined to create the chartered city of Davao. Formally organized in 1937, Davao City would have local officials appointed by the national commonwealth government so that they would not be under the control of the Japanese. This concern was fueled by the Japanese attack on China and the capture of Nanking in 1937, signaling a broadening of the war that flowed into the Second World War.²²

When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in Hawaii on 7 December 1941, the Japanese settlers in Davao were interned and their properties looted. When the Japanese Army invaded Davao twelve days later, the Japanese settlers retaliated, and sought out the pro-American elements. Many Filipino families evacuated to outlying areas. During the war, Davao was sealed off, not even Filipino officials were allowed in. The Japanese settlers supported the war effort and planted food crops for the Japanese troops. The importance of Davao to the Japanese can be shown by the fact that it was defended by 33,000 troops. In the meantime, Filipino guerrillas roamed in the so-called Free Davao outside the garrisoned towns.

In April 1945, the Americans began to retake Davao through Cotabato and Digos. Fighting was relatively light as the Japanese were retreating towards the north. But rooting out pockets of resistance was difficult through the abaca fields, particularly around Mintal. The Davao campaign cost the Americans 350 dead and 1,615 wounded, while the Japanese suffered 4,500 casualties (Lofgren 1996, 29). The surviving Japanese soldiers and civilians were all repatriated to Japan after the war. Their land was taken over by the National Abaca Fiber Corporation (NAFCO), which distributed it to beneficiaries who were mostly guerrillas and veterans.

The war left bad memories among the people of Davao. There were many horror stories of torture and massacre, particularly during the last days of the war when the Japanese soldiers went on an orgy of killing and rape. Many of these cases are documented (Hayase 1999,

278), and many more remain to be told. *Huwes de kutsilyo*, which is a tool of all colonizers and which the Spaniards and the Americans also applied in the Philippines, became associated exclusively with the Japanese. The war erased whatever goodwill the local people had of the Japanese, of the time when Filipinos and Japanese lived together peacefully. For a long time, most Filipinos harbored hatred for the Japanese. After the war, the Japanese descendants had to hide their names for fear of being lynched. In fact, when the war began, Kamitaro Katiju, the son of a Japanese father and a Manobo-Tagakaolo mother, changed his name to Francisco Tale. He was one Japanese mestizo who joined the guerrillas to fight on the side of the Filipinos (Tiu 2005, 152-153).

In Davao today, there are still traces of the once dominant Japanese presence. The Japanese roads around Mintal are still usable; the tunnels built during the war are now tourist attractions; Oshiro Kozo, the pioneer Japanese who died here in 1935, is honored with the name of a barangay, Bago Oshiro; and more importantly, thousands of Japanese descendants, the *Nikkei-jin*, add new blood to the multiethnic mix that is Davao.

Over time, the sad memories of the war have faded (Kim 2010), and while we must never forget the past, the more important thing is that we should never forget to create a better tomorrow. In the case of Davao, the challenge is to make this land a better garden of the gods. Davao has just celebrated the Kadayawan Festival as a thanksgiving for the bounty of the land. We are witness to the abundance of exotic fruits flooding the streets. But while this delights us, we know too that this is not enough as many people do not share in the bounty of the land. Indeed, there is no more land, neither is there work. The garden has become too small, and more and more people are falling into poverty. But there are many ways to alleviate poverty. My favorite dream is to make Davao, indeed, the entire country, not only the garden of the gods, but also the factory of the gods.

Notes

1 Lecture delivered by the author at the 3rd Philippine & Japan NGO International Symposium on Social Development, 25-26 August 2010, at Villa Margarita Hotel, Davao City.

2 The Sa-Huyn-Kalanay tradition is characterized by painted, curvilinear, and interlocking scrolls, according to Solheim, Legaspi, and Neri, SJ (1979). Regarding

Chinese ceramics, the Spaniards of the Villalobos expedition of 1542 found "a quantity of porcelain" on Sarangani Island. The natives said they bought them from the Chinese (Blair and Robertson 1973, 68-69). The diggings around Davao likewise found Thai and Vietnamese ceramics (Junker 2000, 105).

3 At least that is how the Spaniards called them.

4 The Shimabara Rebellion of 1637 involved the uprising of 40,000 Christians in Japan, which is one reason why Japan restricted foreign contact.

5 Jose Oyanguren, a Basque adventurer, occupied Davao after defeating the Moro chieftain Datu Bago in 1848. It was also in 1848 that the US annexed California, taking it from Mexico.

6 The Kalagan Moros ruled the area from Lupon on the east coast of Davao Gulf up to Caraga on the Pacific coast (Tiu 2005, 61-64).

7 The various tribes can be grouped into four major divisions based on linguistic and racial distinctions. The first group is the Manobo, subdivided into the Dibabawon, Kulaman and Sarangani Manobo, Obo, and Bagobo. The second group is the Mandaya, subdivided into the Mandaya, Mansaka, Kalagan, and Tagakaolo. The third group is the Ata, subdivided into the Ata Manobo, Matigsalog, Talaingod, and possibly Mangguwangan. The fourth group is the Blaan and the Guiangan who belong to the same linguistic family. A fifth group may be added, the Sangils who were originally from Sangihe, Indonesia, but who have stayed for so long in Davao del Sur they are considered a Davao tribe (Tiu 2005, 78-81).

8 Many Japanese students were also sent to study abroad.

9 The first known Spanish abaca planter was Juan Bautista Urquiza in Santa Cruz (Hayase 1984, 7).

10 Interview with Datu Lito Omos, Mangguwangan, 14 February 2001 (Tiu 2003, 130).

11 Davao was one of five districts of the Moro Province. The other districts were Lanao, Cotabato, Zamboanga, and Sulu.

12 Apparently during this period the Mexican currency was interchangeably called a peso or a dollar.

13 Editorial of the *Mindanao Herald* dated 8 April 1905, in Tiu (2003, 51). The planters were hoping Mindanao would be annexed like the US did with Hawaii in 1898. In the same year, France annexed land in Guangdong, China.

14 The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was repealed only in 1943.

15 When the US annexed Hawaii in 1898, thousands of Japanese in the islands entered the US mainland.

16 In 1907, the US Government forbade the Japanese from entering the US via Hawaii, Mexico, and Canada. In 1924, the US Congress passed the Immigration Exclusion Act barring all immigration from Japan.

17 A highly respected Bagobo leader who died just recently, Tomas Ito, had Japanese blood.

18 To get around the restriction, the Japanese set up corporations with Filipino board members. They also created the pakyaw system. Some of them married local women to have access to land.

19 A friend relates that their family vinegar business owed its existence to a Japanese neighbor who taught them how to make it. Perhaps the most enduring Japanese food introduced is the *odong*, a type of noodle that remains popular in Davao.

20 American Trade Commissioner Howard in *Manila Tribune* September 1929 (cited in Goodman 1967, 10).

21 Britain gained Hong Kong and surrounding territories in China from the Opium Wars in 1839-1860, took Borneo and Malaysia in the 1880s and Burma in 1886; France turned Indo-China into a protectorate in 1887, and continued to war with Siam (Thailand) for more territories up to 1907; Russia gained territories in the northwestern and northeastern portions of China (1860s onwards); the Dutch continued to expand its control over the Indonesia Archipelago, defeating Aceh in 1908.

22 The US Government restricted trade with Japan in 1939, finally banning the sale of oil to Japan in 1941.

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