

# Odyssey of an Archives

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When the Colonial Powers first extended their hegemony to the frontiers of Africa, Asia and the islands in the Pacific, they brought with them rich cultural traditions which easily became assimilated with the equally rich native culture of these colonised people. This is particularly true in Asia, specially in the case of the Philippines.

During the almost four-century Spanish colonial domination of the islands, a great wealth of archival material, mostly manuscripts and printed documents, was accumulated. These materials reflect the social, economic, political, scientific and spiritual interest of the Filipino people.<sup>1</sup> The collections span the period between 1521 and 1898, the entire length of Spanish adventure in the Philippines. The holdings include Royal Decrees, Protocols, Court Records, notes and excerpts and church records.

The subsequent American military administration of the islands, a product of the Spanish-American War and later the Filipino-American War, resulted in the creation of more official records which are now of archival value.

During the Japanese occupation, a concerted effort was undertaken by the Imperial Japanese authority and the Philippine government to win the trust of the Filipinos. As a result, propaganda materials produced by the Japanese sponsored Philippine Republic added to the regular official government records making. From 1946 onwards, all the succeeding government administrations, including the present Marcos Administration, have contributed to producing a tremendous volume of documents. Records creation has become an intrinsic aspect of the government bureaucratic machinery.

An estimate made in the early 1970s placed the number of Spanish documents and manuscripts in the Philippines as within the 11 million bracket. The majority of these are unclassified and uncatalogued. Cataloguing is at snail's pace. So far about eighty one thousand have been catalogued: these comprise about 80% of the total holding of the Philippines' "national" archives today.<sup>2</sup>

Archival work in the Philippines can be traced back to 1800 when the Colonial Government in Manila first ordered the maintenance of a formal inventory of all court records throughout the islands. This was followed by a Royal Order issued by the King of the Spanish Dominion requiring the collation and inventory of all documents and records produced in the Philippines by the Colonial government. This was done, partly, to check the performance of the Colonial Government in implementing the administrative policies of the Spanish Imperial Government in the Philippines. However, there was no serious attempt to place the archives into one central location or repository. Practically all government departments in Manila maintained their respective archives. This chaotic situation became worse when local governments decided to have their own separate archives. To compound the situation, parish priests who were practically the only authority representing the Church and State in remote areas, kept separate archives for their respective use.

After the signing of the Treaty of Paris on December 10, 1898, the American Military Administration took over the supervision of the affairs of the islands. As part of the prize of war, all colonial office records and archives were transferred to the hands of the new coloniser. The *Office of Archives* was created, specifically, to implement the provisions of the treaty governing the transfer.<sup>3</sup> In 1901, the Filipino-American War finally ended and the Americans established the Civil Government of the Philippines.

One of the early pieces of legislation issued governing the newly acquired colonial possession was Act No. 273<sup>4</sup>, passed by the Philippine Commission, the lawmaking body of the civil government. The act created the *Bureau of Archives* and placed it under the supervision of the Department of Public Instruction.

In 1904, the *Bureau of Patents, Copyrights, and Trademarks* was merged with the *Bureau of Archives*. Ten years later, the Bureau was abolished and all its functions and collections were transferred to the *Archives, Patents, Copyrights and Trademarks Division* created within the *Executive Bureau*. Caught in the web of early colonial bureaucracy, in three months time, the *Division of Archives . . .* was again returned back to the Department of Public Instruction to join another newly created body called the Philippines Library and Museum.

When the Philippines was granted autonomous status by the United States Government in 1916, the Philippine Library and Museum, which still included the *Division of Archives . . .*, was incorporated with the Department of Interior and, for unknown reasons, the archives body which had been tossed from one government department to the other, was again transferred, to the Department of Justice, and then, finally, to the Philippine Legislature.

With the establishment of the Commonwealth Government of the

Philippines<sup>5</sup> in 1935, the Philippine Senate was abolished. The Philippine Library and Museum was separated into two distinct government entities called The National Library and The National Museum. To the first, went the *Division of Archives*. The National Library was placed under the control of the Speaker of the National Assembly.

After the Second World War, the National Library, together with the *Division of Archives*, was renamed the Bureau of Public Libraries and rejoined the Department of Education. The National Library found its final location within the Education Department during the transfer but the Archives were transferred again in 1958.<sup>6</sup> It was deemed appropriate that the Archives be part of the newly created Bureau of Records Management under the General Services Department. With its new found place, the archives division operated through its three sections, namely: Spanish Documents Section, Reference Service Section, and the General Documents Section.<sup>7</sup>

When Martial Law was declared in 1972, reorganization of the Executive Branch of the government followed.<sup>8</sup> One of the offices affected was the *Division of Archives*. Under the new arrangements, the archives division was located in the National Historical Institute, a cultural agency within the Ministry of Education and Culture.

As a consequence of the seemingly endless search for the right place to stay, the Philippines' "National" Archives has done nothing in terms of important archival work such as administrative history and conservation. What is regrettable is the fact that, aside from change of status, physical transfer of archival collections also occurred. From 1902 to the present, no less than ten places have been the home of the archives and it appears that thousands of precious archival materials have been lost. Moreover, natural calamities inherent to a tropical country like the Philippines, such as flood, fire and earthquakes have brought havoc to the archives.

At present the Philippines' "National" Archives is still searching for the right place to stay, to call its own. The future seems bright for, in 1979, the Marcos Administration ordered the restoration of a big Spanish-built structure in Manila to be the home of the country's archival treasures.<sup>9</sup>

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Domingo Abella, "The Philippine National Archives — A Brief Sketch", *Southeast Asian Archives*, Vol. 4 (July 1971).
2. *Ibid.*
3. Teodoro Agoncillo and Oscar Alfonso, *A Short History of the Filipino People* (University of the Philippines, 1961).
4. The Philippine Autonomy Act, otherwise known as the Jones Law, was enacted by the U.S. Congress and became law on 29 August, 1916.
5. Abella, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

6. Reorganization Plan No. 8-A, February 14, 1956, *Official Gazette*, 1958, Vol. 54, No. 6.
7. Executive Order No. 290, March 14, 1958, *Official Gazette*, March 31, 1958, Vol. 54, No. 6.
8. *Presidential Decree No. 1*, September 24, 1972, Office of the President.
9. *Letter of Instruction No. 812*, Directing the Restoration of the Intendencia Building, Office of the President, February 14, 1979.

#### FURTHER READING

- Serafin Quiason, "The Value and Importance of the Establishment of a Southeast Asian Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives", *Southeast Asian Archives*, 1969.
- J. M. Saniel, "The State of Retrospective Philippine Research Resources", *Southeast Asian Archives*, Vol. 3 (July 1970).