

*Story of a shantytown built in the wrong place*

***Miracle in Manila***

*Two worlds separated by an avenue (Roxas Avenue). On the one hand the luxury and vulgarity in an already globalized country (the Philippines), on the other the extreme poverty of an excluded, small minority of Muslims in a Catholic city, clung to their mosque already threatened by bulldozers*

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In the beginning there was the trade. Or rather, the hope of a little more comfortable life, the mirage of modernity. The city lights continue to dazzle the rural poor, and that is how Manila became MetroManila, a 14 million inhabitants aggregate, a good chunk of the roughly 75 million Filipinos scattered on a 7 thousand islands archipelago.

The stalls of Muslim Maranao ethnic group slowly began to fill the seafront Baclaran district, the southern part of the long Roxas Avenue, which runs along the entire Manila from south to north, on the side of the China Sea. The sun goes to Vietnam to die, giving the illusion of beauty to one of the ugliest places in the world. Yet, twenty years ago, when the first immigrants of this Islamic tribe arrived, people came here to do their picnic on the beach under the palm trees that are now the pale memory of what was green. Where there was grass, there is now a city. More than a city, a metropolitan nightmare.

Baclaran district is considered a "third category" district: nothing to do with Makati, luxurious financial center and diplomatic residences, or Intramuros, pretty little historic town with Spanish influence, as well as the only pedestrian oasis in the middle of the traffic jam; but even away from Payatas, the quiet urban hell, the city of garbage that collapsed a year ago, causing dozens of dead people.

Baclaran is the third range of globalization, probably the truest, the highest aspiration for who wants to go out at all costs both from a desperate poverty or from an upstanding poverty that is all the rural environment can offer. Baclaran is the real market in Manila. Everything is bought and everything is sold, in a world made up by three elements: concrete, asphalt and plastic. Illuminated by neon lights at night, stifled by a pale sun in the daytime, the third range world breathes carbon monoxide and cooking oil, kerosene and ketchup, with some whiff of sewage and grilled meat 24 hours a day. There is a MacDonal'd's at every corner, or a Jollybee (the Philippine version of Mc Donald's), often next to a gas station, in a frightening swarm of people and cars. You exit the metro station and you enter a low shopping center, attacked by the noise and trashy music at full volume from street vendors of CDs, by karaoke (a national craze). A lot of ugly clothes, imitation handbags, watches, shoes, leather jackets, and then electronic gadgets, toys "Made in Taiwan", fake flowers, real fruit, rotten vegetables. At the corners of streets, on sidewalks, in mud or on asphalt, dozens of poor people survive without bothering anyone, as they were invisible: the most of people accept them all, in a mixture of gentleness and passivity, often smiling, even. There are motels for the fast sex piled around the large church dedicated to Our Lady, always incredibly crowded with believers: devotion coexists with decadence, the sacred love with profane one. They are good Catholic guys, Filipinos, with a deep sense of family, basketball (the national sport) fans, fervent consumers of everything, passionate audience of soap operas and music videos.

But the small Islamic community that, expelled from the apartment for the high prices, has built his village by sheet-metal and plywood, it seems completely out of Baclaran - Babylon. It is a community united by exclusion, which seems to live its state of siege without any resentment. A small basketball court is the access to the slums. A few meters away, there are clothes hanging on the barbed wire. Behind, there is the mosque, a poor building, the pride of these 180 families.

In the background, beyond a ditch, the city seems to send a couple of threatening bulldozers to dig in the mud, creating an even more desolate landscape.

"This land is ours and we will never go away " says the administrator of the village "we already

applied for the final acquisition nine years ago, and we sent all the documents to President Estrada, who unfortunately fell". But then he immediately corrects the adverb "unfortunately", because now Gloria Macapagal Arroyo commands, adding, "We trust the new president, who is familiar with the reality of Mindanao (and so with Muslim Filipinos) because of old family ties; Estrada was a corrupt guy, those who want to show us the door are his friends".

People of PEA, "Public Estate Authority", the government agency in charge of public land, expropriation and sales, in practice the State real estate office. Controlled directly by the President of the Philippines, it is clearly one of the strategic places for the mixture of politics and business, and therefore also of corruption, the exchange of favors, the impudent private interests pursued in the name of "common good". In the Philippines they have always been the features of politics: the continuation of business by other means. There are no real parties, trade unions are weak and divided, there has never been a left worthy of this name (apart from a small communist party, banned from 1957 to 1992, supporter of "National People's Army" guerrillas in the seventies, and now divided into quarrelsome factions).

An appearance similar to many other Asian countries, which anticipated the globalization embracing a capitalism without inhibitions, which makes them, for consumers and lifestyle, more westernmost than the West.

The Philippines add a touch of Latin America (the legacy of Spanish rule first and then American one), sad and joyful at the same time.

Sad for the wealth in the hands of 400 families, an oligarchy that controls the power by any means, in face of half population living below the poverty line (the official statistics say this: more likely it is 60-70 percent Filipinos). Sad for the presence of a bulky army that has never abandoned the temptations of a coup (behind the recent attempt of occupation of the presidential palace there was probably the former Defense Minister Enrile) and a Catholic Church that has never been able (or never wanted) to form a social conscience in the country, by endorsing a traditionally dominated mentality by all powers.

The joy is in the culture of *fiestas* (one of many Spanish words remained in the spoken language), in people's vitality (they do not usually miss a chance to eat, sing and make love), in the large participation in religious rites.

"The Philippines spent 300 years in the convent and 50 years in Hollywood", synthesized a Filipino writer. As Cuba, Philippine independence dream develop during Spanish-American War of 1898. But unlike Caribbean island, the Philippines have never left the shadow of Uncle Sam (even if President Ramos has shut down American bases).

In the Catholic and anti-Communist mentality, (someone calls it "clerical-fascist"), forged over decades, neither the left nor the Islamic component find reference. Not surprisingly, the double guerrilla from Marcos on, that every Filipino leaders have had to face is Islamic from Mindanao (south) and Communist from Luzon area (north).

"There are three kinds of Muslims" explains the secretary of the village "practitioners, who follow the true religion and respect everyone, believers, who are the majority, and false Muslims, that are the pigs of the Islamic Liberation Front, who kill and kidnap people". None supports violence or even fanaticism, but everybody says they are ready to fight to defend their tiny slum.

Already once they rejected the officers of PEA which, supported by the police, wanted to evacuate inhabitants. "Here is the house of God, our place of prayer, and no one is allowed to profane it". Where the mosque is, there the Muslim community is formed, such as small European villages perched around the church tower.

But the religion of money rules the archipelago and the world: the land should be used for a new, huge car park and yet another consumerism temple, the mall of SM, a large chain of shopping centers run by a very strong China lobby in Manila, closely tied to the deposed President Estrada (who was to be "the president of the poor").

Hardly things can change with Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, imposed by "People Power Revolution 2" in January (the first was the one led to the fall of Marcos in 1986). The new president seems now only the respectable face of the usual oligarchy. Daughter of President Diosdado Macapagal, a

liberal who dismantled the already limited role of the State in the economy in the early sixties, wife of one of the richest men in the country, Gloria (familiarily called GMA by Filipino newspapers) was formed in the U.S., studying with Bill Clinton. Nobody discusses her economic competence, nor her personal honesty. On the other hand, being worse than Joseph "Erap" Estrada, womanizer and gambler, seems impossible. But in her first hundred days of presidency she did not want to face any of the country greatest issues (the income distribution, land reform, the fight against corruption, the diaspora of emigrants and overseas workers). The campaign for the renewal of the House and Senate (they voted on May 14) was completely lacking of content, all based on personal publicity of candidates, which are often more mundane than movie stars. In compensation, however, there are already more than sixty dead people by politically motivated violence, a bloody habit for the Philippines (there was no election, since the fall of Marcos on, which has not seen dozens of dead people in clashes between factions of the different candidates). It seems nothing changes, in spite of the emphasis on the two "revolutions".

The inhabitants of this surreal and abandoned place have already made an application for a permanent settlement and sent it to the new president. They met the mayor of the area, obtaining some reassurance (it seems that the land might be under its jurisdiction and not under the one of PEA). But the bulldozers keep digging, as if they want to create an unbridgeable gap between the village and the metropolis, and then swallowing huts and mosque for the creation of the planned shopping center. Hard to imagine a different ending, given times. For a miracle to Manila it takes a very lively imagination. Or the belief in "compassionate and merciful" Allah.

**Cesare Sangalli**