The Bilibid Prison as an American Colonial Project in the Philippines

Prisons have become an indispensible aspect of the judicial system in contemporary societies. Many scholars, notably sociologists, have studied and analyzed the complex and multi-faceted nature of prisons. In the historical discipline, there have been works that historicized the rise and development of prisons and prison management. Since the prison is a site of power relations, prison histories reflect a convergence of the historical discipline’s social, cultural, and political aspects. In this regard, the study of prisons in general, becomes a means towards a deeper understanding of society.

This paper is an attempt to write an account of the Bilibid Prison during the American colonial period. Based on primary documents from official government reports, it will be shown that the management of Bilibid, to a certain extent, paved the way for the consolidation of the colonial system beyond the obvious function of the prison as a place of criminal incarceration. It will be argued that the Bilibid also figured to be another avenue to showcase American ‘benevolence.’ It is hoped that the work would contribute and entice more researches, multi- or interdisciplinary in nature, on the prison and also contribute in the growing literature on Philippine-American relations.

Keywords: Prison History, American Empire, American Exceptionalism, Bilibid Prison, Colonial Prison
INTRODUCTION

In 1911, an article published in the *Manila Times* alluded to the Bilibid Prison "as the story of a missionary effort in the highest and best sense of the term, the record of a reformatory labor whose results are beyond telling" (Lewis 1911:82). This portrayal not only provides praise for the Bilibid Prison as a penal institution in the early years of the American colonial regime in the Philippines, it also echoes American efforts to legitimize the American conquest and acquisition of the Philippines as a civilizing mission through "benevolent assimilation." In this representation, the prison and the penal system under the Americans became another arena to showcase American "exceptionalism," the discourse which figured vital in their legitimation of the empire, arguing that they were exceptional, different from their European counterparts.

This short paper will show how the programs employed by the Americans in managing the Bilibid turned the prison to a laboratory as well as a colonial project that reflected their "exceptional" and "benevolent assimilation" of the Philippines. Hence, it will be illustrated that the Americans were able to utilize the prison beyond its obvious function of being a site of incarceration and an important part of the system of social control. Being an important aspect of society, writing the history of the prison, as historian David Rothman (1995) notes, brings forth the confluence of the social and political fields of the discipline since prisons can serve as windows to analyzing the ways societies and governments maintain social order. We can further this notion by saying that the cultural dimension of the field of history is also involved in that the cultural milieu and intellectual traditions of a particular period are also manifested in the prison. Prisons, therefore, offer a wealth of knowledge useful in gaining a deeper understanding of society; interestingly so in the context of colonialism when, like the prisoners secluded inside the bars of the prison, the sovereignty of a state is held by another.

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Prisons have become an indispensable aspect of the judicial system in contemporary societies. Many scholars, notably sociologists, have already produced studies analyzing the many facets of the prison and have looked into the lives of the incarcerated individuals. Noteworthy among these is of course the landmark works of Gresham Sykes (1958) and Erving Goffman (1961) that looked at the ‘society’ inside the prison. Moving to a wide-ranging theoretical work is David Garland’s *Punishment and Modern Society: A Study in Social Theory* (1991a), a comprehensive treatise on punishment that subsumes prison, imprisonment, and the ways it has been explicated. Surveying, assessing, and synthesizing the various intellectual traditions from Durkheimian functionalism to Foucauldian notions of power and knowledge, Garland encourages and challenges researchers to further expand the body of knowledge on punishment and ultimately look at it as a social institution.

As for the field of history, researches have also been done in the attempt to historicize the rise and development of prisons and prison management. Worth mentioning would be *The Oxford History of the Prison: The Practice of Punishment in Western Society* (1995) edited by Norval Morris and David Rothman. The collection of essays chronicles the history of imprisonment in Europe and America. A more recent work and in a way paving the way in filling the gap for the other regions of the world is the recent volume *Cultures of Confinement* (2007) edited by Frank Dikotter and Ian Brown. The volume presents case studies of prison histories in Africa, Asia and Latin America. More relevant to this paper, there have also been researches on colonial prisons in India (Arnold 1994) and Indochina (Zinoman 1999). In a way bridging historical and sociological or theoretical way of treating prisons as subjects of inquiry is the celebrated *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* by Michel Foucault (1975). This work remains to be an important opus that inspired and theoretically anchored researches on the prison especially those dealing with discourses of power.

The works mentioned above are testaments to the importance of the social scientific study of prisons and how an interdisciplinary approach can yield valuable interpretations. This present study aspires to contribute to this growing body of literature about prisons and punishment.

FOCUS AND LIMITATIONS
This paper attempts to write an account of the Bilibid Prison in the context of the American period in the early 20th century Philippines. Following David Garland’s ideas (1991a; 1991b), this paper aims to treat the Bilibid Prison as a ‘cultural artifact’ that embodied wider cultural meanings. In order to gain sound understanding of the Bilibid as a social institution, careful historical contextualization is deemed necessary. The paper aims to locate the history of the Bilibid within the wider colonial framework of the American regime particularly in the American desire of legitimizing their ‘civilizing mission.’

This paper explores how the Americans were able to utilize the prison beyond its function as a site of incarceration. At this point it is important to mention the caveat for this study that it will not fully delve into the lives of the prisoners, or the ‘society of captives’ at this point in time. Also, the relation of the prison in the anti-colonial struggles of the time is not explored. The researcher believes that this type of inquiry, as seen in the works of Arnold (1994) or Zinoman (1999), on prisons in India and Indochina where the inmates’ identity, criminal background, and activities inside prison are examined, is worth a separate paper altogether. Instead, this research examines the official records and reports published by the American colonial regime to reveal how the policies employed in the management of the Bilibid echo their supposed exceptional empire. This study views the Bilibid not only as a prison but more so as a colonial project and laboratory.

CONTEXTUALIZING THE PERIOD: AMERICAN EMPIRE BUILDING
The last few years of the nineteenth century saw the demise of Spain as a colonial power as one by one her colonies, the Philippines included, waged wars of independence. This proved most opportune for the United States as during this time the country was eyeing to expand her foreign market, looking in particular toward Asia. When the
USS Maine was sunk during the battle between Cuba and Spain, the United States made a decisive move when she declared war against the waning colonial power and thus the Spanish-American War ensued. Not long after, Spain found herself at the losing end of the war and she capitulated, signing the Treaty of Paris in 1898, ceding her colonies to the United States. Hence at the dawn of the twentieth century, the world bore witness to the rise of a new imperial power. For the Filipinos, the hard fought and rightfully won independence from Spain was undermined. A new colonial regime was afoot (Planta, 2008; See also Guerrero and Schumacher, 1998 and Guerrero, 1998).

Entering the game of empire building much later than the Europeans, the new global power had a harder time establishing legitimacy to their take-over of the Philippines. They not only had to legitimize their colonial endeavor to the Filipinos, they also had to prove themselves to the world and the Americans in the US. Hence, the world saw the proliferation of the discourse of “American exceptionalism.” The exceptionalist paradigm asserts the idea that the American nation, as a rising imperial power, is unique and different from her European counterparts highlighting the US’s benevolent goals of “transplanting the ideas and improvements of one civilization upon another” (Williams 1901 in Go 2005). The exceptionalist paradigm can thus be viewed as the unifying theme in the American legitimation of their engagement in imperialism, incorporating within it the ideas of the American ‘civilizing mission’ and the fulfillment of their ‘white man’s burden’ ultimately leading, in the case of the Philippines, to a ‘benevolent assimilation.’

The idea of ‘benevolent assimilation’ proved useful for the Americans since true enough, the idea of a civilizing mission is already a pastiche since all colonial regimes used this rhetoric. The oxymoron of “benevolent assimilation” fostered the doublethink of exceptionalism where the Americans found nothing paradoxical about the idea of being a benign colonizer and the harsh and racist policies were viewed as necessary (Tinio 2009; Diokno 2011). The rhetoric of exceptionalism truly became a key element in justifying the American take-over of the Philippines, along with other territories such as Cuba and Puerto Rico, both in the colony and against the ardent anti-imperialist politicians in the US. One way it was invoked was by contrasting the American efforts from the Europeans’ describing the latter, in a way, inferior. A historical sociologist, explains how the exceptionalist discourse affected the legitimation of the American empire:

In the purview of exceptionalism, the United States was not quite an empire. If it was an empire at all, it was a special one. For unlike European empires, the US enterprise was an exercise in effective benevolence, bringing to those whom it touched the benefits of Anglo-American civilization… To wit, US colonial rule in the Philippines was not exploitative or tyrannical… [i]t was benign, a civilizing mission… (Go 2005: 2)

The American endeavor in the Philippines was thus explicitly described as a tutelary effort seeking to prepare Filipinos for self-rule. Staying true to this paradigm, the Americans extensively showed their proclaimed benevolence and tutelary spirit as they reorganized the widespread education system, launched public health campaigns, and opened space for Filipino participation in politics through elections and the formation of political parties (Go 2008). As a newly inducted global power, however, the American rule in its early years in the Philippines saw an evolution of policies as the Americans defined and redefined the ways by which they were going to handle the new colony. Indeed, “lacking a colonial vocation, the Americans experimented in the Philippines” (Karnow 1989).

Understanding the complexities of the American regime in the Philippines has tickled the interest of scholars over the years. Many historians have tackled the many facets of the American period in the Philippines. Among these dimensions, public health and education are two of the more, if not most, explored topics aside from the political and diplomatic aspects. Few examples of works touching on the education system under the Americans would be Glen May’s Social Engineering in the Philippines (1980), and Mary Racelis’s Bearers of Benevolence
(2001); and for public health, Warwick Anderson’s *Colonial Pathologies* (2007) and the recent researches of historians such as Mercedes Planta on the American public health system (2008), Francis Gealogo on influenza (2009) and Aaron Moralina on tuberculosis (2009). Numerous other works, published and unpublished, are available.

Since the American regime itself boasted of its efforts to modernize and bring civilization to the Philippines, the education and public health systems have figured to become avenues for tutelage and eventually, gauges of Filipino capacities for self-rule. Historians of the period have gained ground in deconstructing the exceptionalist discourse that abound the colonial records, revealing the ways how these seemingly benevolent policies actually reinforced the colonial order. Teasing out the racist undertones, the implied superiority of the white caucasian stock, the dominant racial group in the United States, over the “brown” Filipinos, is one of the effective ways by which light is shed to see the inner workings of these technologies of colonial rule.

In the sustained effort of scholars to continuously expand the body of knowledge on the American colonial period in the Philippines, one can see that many aspects are still waiting to be thoroughly explored. In the case of the present study, it is interesting that only few studies have actually tackled penology, relative to topics, say, public health and education. We have few works such as that of Michael Salman on the Iwahig Penal Colony (1995), Gealogo on the interiorization/exteriorization discourse relative to punishment (2004), and Gutierrez on the state of criminology in the early 20th century (2010).

Drawing a connection between prisons colonialism, historian Michael Salman, writing about the penal system in American Philippines, offers an illustration:

> The prison—an asylum to segregate “criminals” from their environment—highlights the alienating quality of colonialism as a project of cultural disparagement, rejection and reformation. As a space of punishment and coercion, the prison shares with colonialism an explicit extrasocietal legitimation of force and an implicit structural encouragement to even greater levels of brutality—all rationalized in discourses of justice, protection of society against danger, and a mission to reform and rehabilitate (Salman 1995: 114).

On the matter of discussing American exceptionalism, similar to the education system and public health, penology is a very good aspect to look at in terms of analyzing a colonial regime in terms of its supposed benevolence. Under colonialism, the way the colonizer will treat the convicted criminals reveals much about their outlook and mindset. Not only are these criminals the ‘inferior’ races who they opt to bring to the light of civilization, they are the dregs of the ‘inferior’ races’ society. The prison therefore becomes an effective stage to showcase benevolence. Moreover, prisons can figure to become “parts and parcel of the ‘civilizing mission’ of colonizers, as existing penal practices, which were often based on physical punishment were viewed as ‘barbaric’ and ‘uncivilized.’” (Dikotter 2007)

As will be shown later, prisons, in this case the Bilibid Prison during the American period became a colonial project where the Americans endeavored to highlight their regime’s benevolence through the programs they launched to rehabilitate the prisoners. The Bilibid is a key representative penological institution since it served as the nerve center of American colonial penology in the Philippines, being not only the largest prison in the Philippines during that time but also since it was the headquarters of the Bureau of Prisons.

**THE BILIBID PRISON: A BRIEF BACKGROUND**

When the Americans came, the Bilibid Prison was already serving as the center of the prison system under the Spaniards. The construction of the Bilibid was completed in 1865 and became operational in 1866 under then Spanish Governor-General Rafael Echague. The establishment of the Bilibid in the latter years of the Spanish colonial period, as Greg Bankoff asserts, is reflective of the waning control of Spain over the Philippines. In the second half of the 19th century, Bankoff describes, the Philippines became a judicial state when the military forces'
the Church’s power were gradually undermined and lessened with the
British defeat of the Spaniards in late 18th century and the assault the
Church received from the propaganda and secularization movements.
The law became the most viable option for the Spaniards in their last
efforts to stay in control (Bankoff 1996). We can also say that the
establishment of the Bilibid is in line with the developments in penology
all over the world. By the end of the 18th century and beginning the 19th
century, imprisonment became the widely accepted form of punishment
as opposed to inhumane forms such as flogging and torture. The
completion of the Bilibid is almost contemporaneous with a landmark
penal institution in Europe, the Pentonville Prison in England which was
constructed in 1842 (Rothman and Morris 1995; Gutierrez 2010).

Located at the corner of Calle Azcarraga in Manila, the Bilibid
was constructed in a 17-acre land. The Bilibid was truly one of the
first large penitentiaries in the world. It was even surmised that one
point it was the largest prison in the world and in reality the largest
prison under American control during the early 20th century (Bureau
of Prisons 1924).

The architecture of the prison is influenced by the ideal penitentiary
conceived by 18th century Utilitarian Philosopher Jeremy Bentham,
the panopticon. The design of Bilibid is reminiscent of a wheel with
a central hub and spokes branching out. There is a central watchtower
resembling the central hub of a wheel from which the buildings where
the convicts are housed radiate. The central structure was actually
referred to as edificio panoptico by the Spaniards (Philippine National
Archives Memorias y Planos, 1880).

EMPIRE AND PRISON: THE BILIBID AS AN
AMERICAN COLONIAL PROJECT
When the American government took over, they did not scrap all of the
Spanish institutions they found in operation. Among those they retained
and utilized were the penal institutions including the Bilibid. In the
establishment of the new colonial government, the Americans, in 1901,
released Act No. 2221 of the Philippine Commission, which created the
various government bureaus, including the Bureau of Prisons that was
tasked to manage the prisons and oversee their operations (U.S. War
Department 1901).

The prisons bureau was under the supervision of the Department of
Commerce and Police until 1905 when it was transferred to the Bureau
of Public Instruction by virtue of the Reorganization Act of 1905. The
transfer was rationalized as a move to equalize the functions of each
department and also “to emphasize the education feature of the penal
institution” (Philippine Commission 1906). This shift is indicative of
the evolution of American policies towards the Philippines. By middle
of the 1900s when the Americans had proclaimed the end of the
Philippine-American War (1902), the situation in the colony is much
more pacified, especially so in Manila, that the regime has shifted
towards campaigns that lay out the tutelary endeavor, the “teaching”
of the Philippines institutions and people to become more democratic,
educated and civilized.

The Bilibid prison served as the headquarters of the Bureau of
Prisons. As the central office, the entire system of the insular prisons
consisting of the Iwahig Penal Colony in Palawan, the San Ramon
penal colony in Mindanao, Fort Mills in Corregidor, and the Bontoc
Prison were supervised by the director of the bureau of prisons housed
at Bilibid (Bureau of Prisons 1924).

The Rehabilitative Ideal: Work, Education,
and Self-Regulation in Bilibid
Let us fast forward to the 1920s when, as Lewis Gleeck espoused,
“American Penal Institution in the Philippines attracted worldwide
attention and applause” (Gleeck 1976). In 1927, Director of Prisons
Ramon Victorio remarked:

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1 An act providing for the organization of the Departments of the
Interior, of Commerce and Police, of Finance and Justice, and of Public
Instruction, Act no. 222 1901.
Modern penology no longer looks upon a prison sentence as a vengeance meted out by the state but rather as a necessary moral restraint for the safety of the community and the reformation of the offender. The Bilibid Prison believes and practices the idea that it is a reformatory rather than a penitentiary, an institution to reclaim and refit men and women from a life of crime to a life of usefulness (Victorio 1927:np).

Since the Americans started running the Bilibid, rehabilitation of the prisoners had been the guiding principle. We can trace this thinking of the Americans to the very development of penological tradition in the US and, by extension, the western world. The gradual shift in the perspective towards the criminal and how to deal with him was markedly seen under US President Andrew Jackson when the prisons were beginning to be treated as institutions that can help transform convicts and rehabilitate them towards becoming productive citizens once again (Rothman 1995). By the 20th century, the criminal was seen as someone sick who needs to be cured (Rothman 1995). This turn to rehabilitation was taken by the Americans in the management of prisons in the Philippines. We can view the adoption of these penal policies, being employed in the metropole, to the colony as another way of showcasing their exceptional character as imperialists not denying the colony of their ways. This is aside of course from the pragmatic reality that these were the policies they knew best.

In carrying out the rehabilitative programs, the Americans prided themselves in having the prisoners at Bilibid engaged in activities where education, be it mastering a certain trade or academic learning, was an integral aspect of rehabilitating convicts. Prisoners are subjected to a regular schedule every day.

The life of a prisoner in Bilibid begins, of course, upon his entry in the institution. Upon entry, the convict undergoes a medical examination and quarantined for a week. This was to make sure that he is not carrying any virus that could trigger an outbreak. The prisoner, upon passing the exam or being cured should there need be, was given his prison uniform of horizontal stripes. The stripes indicate the sentence of the prisoner: if the sentence is more than five years, narrower. He is then made to memorize the prison rules on conduct. After this his skills will be assessed to find out what job he will occupy (Lewis 1911).

Prisoners were set to work in the industrial division of the Bilibid Prison. This division housed workshops where prisoners engaged in making products to be sold at the Bilibid salesrooms which were completed in 1905. The industrial division was said to have fulfilled the goal of providing instructive employment for prisoners “to furnish a means by which [they] may equip themselves with a trade for a livelihood when they re-enter society on an independent self-respecting basis” (Bureau of Prisons 1930: 5). The table below summarizes the activities in the various departments of the industrial division:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DEPARTMENT</th>
<th>ACTIVITY</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Department A</td>
<td>General machines shop, blacksmithing, carriage making, carriage painting, sheet metal working, upholstering, dry kiln, automobile and motorcycle repairs, electrical repairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department B</td>
<td>Manufacture of all classes of household and office furniture, cabinet work, wood carving, picture frames, repairing and refinishing furniture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department C</td>
<td>Construction of buildings; concrete construction, and the manufacture and repair of prison equipment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department D</td>
<td>Manufacture of woven hemp hammocks, bejucio chairs, rattan and bamboo furniture, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department E</td>
<td>Tailor shop, makes all the clothes used by the inmates of insular and provincial prisons throughout the Philippines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department F</td>
<td>Steam laundry,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department G</td>
<td>Embroidery, lace-making, crochet. Employment of women prisoners.</td>
</tr>
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The work at the industrial division consumes a prisoner’s seven and half hours each day. They were actually compensated for their work especially with the passage of the compensation act (Act No. 2489) in 1916. From the salary they are getting, 50% is withheld and given
to them upon release. It has been noted that many prisoners were able to acquire enough money from the lump sum payment to last for the first year of their reentry to society as free citizens (Victorio 1927). So successful was the industrial division in training the inmates that, as the Americans claim, “the prisoners become interested in their work and many of them secure positions immediately upon leaving the prison. There is a demand at all times for discharged prisoners who are skilled mechanics and there has been no difficulty in procuring positions for this class” (Philippine Commission 1911: 177). Such a remark is not surprising since the Americans wanted to project the image that their efforts at the Bilibid bore fruit to the point of claiming that the released inmates of that time did not bore any stigma from being an ex-convict.

The policy of educating the prisoners did not stop at providing training for useful trades, since a prison school system was set up within the walls of the Bilibid in 1909 (Philippine Commission 1910). There were day and night classes with subjects ranging from simple reading and arithmetic to literature and history. Attendance at the schools was compulsory for everyone below the age of 50. The prison school employs the help of inmates with degrees as teachers. In 1914, a separate building to be used as a school was completed inside the Bilibid compound. Aside from this, collaborative work is done with the bureau of education in the form of sending teachers and donation of books that at times even numbered to 12,400 units. In praising the success of the prison school the 1927 report of the Governor General exclaimed: ‘It is gratifying to note their love for education so that those over 50 years who are upon confinement did not know how to read or write, not even their names, and who were entirely illiterate can now read and write’ (Governor General of the Philippines 1927: 234).

With education and a regimented work schedule, prisoners are carefully monitored and assessed. With minimal to zero infraction of prison rules, and highlighted by good performance in the industrial division, prisoners can opt for promotion in the stratified classification of prisoners. Prisoners are ranked from the third class, lowest and initial rank of an inmate upon entry, to the first class. To summarize:

[A prisoner] shall be promoted gradually in accordance with his conduct until he shall be given compensation for his work in the industrial plants and granted the privilege of being the foreman of a group of prison laborers. The time required for a prisoner to reach the grade of first-class prisoner and receive the distinction of being a skilled laborer is not long for ordinarily such promotions come within six months or before that time, the policy being to promote at any time he shows he deserves that distinction (Victorio 1927: 4).

Still in the spirit of being tutelary as well as a manifestation of the Bilibid being a colonial laboratory, the Americans also devised ways to let the prisoners regulate the situation in the prison themselves. This was seen in the establishment of the prisoners’ court in 1915 and having a trusty police force composed of prisoners. To become part of the court and police force a prisoner must obtain the first rank status in the hierarchy (Philippine Commission 1915). Before the establishment of this court in 1915, the assistant director of the bureau decided on cases of infractions of prison rules committed by the inmates. With the prisoners’ court in operation, inmates were given the responsibility
of regulating their conduct and adjudicate behavioral infractions committed by their peers. The court was composed entirely of prisoners – from the judge to the prosecution and defense counsels to the sheriff. The court operates like regular courts outside prison, following trial procedures, line-up of witnesses, and rulings of the judge. Penalties ranged from losing meal privileges to demerits. The decisions of the court, however, were still subject to the review of the assistant director (Philippine Commission 1915; Governor General of the Philippines 1918; Brown 2007). The self-regulation practice invested to the inmates reflects the American policy of testing and evaluating Filipino capacities for self-rule as part of its tutelage program within the grand scheme of the US civilizing mission.

A Bastion of Exceptionalism: ‘Taking care’ of prisoners

Reading through the reports of the bureau of prisons, one finds a constant assertion that the management of the prison was highly laudable for the ways in which they are treating the prisoners. The records are replete with the various policies that were carried out to ‘take care’ of the prisoners since “no efforts have been spared in making the life of prisoners as pleasant as possible” (Governor General of the Philippines 1924: 164).

Maintaining health and sanitation inside the Bilibid is one of the major undertakings of the bureau. Same with the prison school system, health and sanitation inside the prison is managed collaboratively with the bureau of health. With the same reorganization act of 1905, the supervision of health inside the prison was transferred to the health bureau. One of the initial recommendations of the health bureau was the fixing of the sewage system and the replacement of the bamboo bunker beds with metal-framed ones so as the facilitation of cleaning and disinfecting the beds would be easier (Philippine Commission 1906).

Under the supervision of the health bureau the prison hospital which construction started in 1907 and completed in 1909 became “exceedingly well equipped and offers facilities for the treatment of all classes of disease” (Philippine Commission 1907; Philippine Commission 1909). What we see here is that the fixation of the Americans with maintaining public health in the colony is mirrored in the Bilibid. Methods of quarantine, vaccination, and a well ordered hospital were undertaken inside the prisons to curb the spread of epidemics and diseases. So dedicated to the health and sanitation in the Bilibid were the Americans that in 1928, Dr. Santiago Estrada, then head of the prison sanitation, was given a scholarship to specialize on his medical studies (Governor General of the Philippines 1928).

Aside from health and sanitation another avenue where the management sought to showcase their care for the prisoners was on the matter of religion. Religious services from the Catholics and Protestants alike were regularly observed in the prison. The collaboration with the religious groups was deemed very beneficial since, as Victorio phrased it,

“If we consider the moral regeneration of a convict does not come only as the result of compulsory labor and discipline but also as the effect of the teaching of same moral doctrines and of direct appeal to the heart and conscience of the convict in order to awaken his faith in God as the supreme consolation of those in misfortune” (Victorio 1927: 12).

The management of the Bilibid also provided “instructive and reformative amusements.” These includes athletic games as volleyball, softball, and other sports were introduced to the inmates, theatrical plays which the prisoners themselves stage, the establishment of the Bilibid Band, regular screenings of films courtesy of the Universal Film Exchange Company (Governor General of the Philippines 1917). Such activities also served the pragmatic function of keeping the prisoners occupied so that they have no time to plot obnoxious plans, much like what transpired outside the walls. With the intensive introduction of American culture to the Filipinos not only to Americanize but also to keep the minds of Filipinos occupied and water down the thinking that life was still under the pretext of colonialism.

These efforts at a ‘humanitarian’ approach did not go unnoticed and this proved most beneficial to the justifications of American
Image of the Prison Hospital in Bilibid. (Lewis 1911)
exceptionalism. In influencing the public perception toward colonialism both here and in the US, the Bilibid prison gave considerable contributions.

Under the Americans the Bilibid prison figured to be a major tourist destination in the Philippines. The number of visitors even reached to an estimated number of 25,000 in 1925, 2,000 of which were described to be ‘globe trotters.’ The policies, and the prisoners conduct were lauded and the Bilibid as a colonial project was judged to be of immense success. So much so that journalist W. H. Lewis called it ‘the most remarkable penal institution in the world.’ He further noted:

[Bilibid] is a penological experiment of extraordinary value, brilliantly justified in its methods and success. [It] provided in the shaping of one shiftless, sullen malefactor into a craftsman, a good man with his hands fit and adapted to honorable tasks (Lewis 1911: 82).

COLONIAL REALITIES: RACISM AND EXPLOITATION

Along with the purported success of the Bilibid in showcasing American benevolence came the reality of the colonial context. With this we see how the racial view the Americans held toward the Filipinos was clearly manifested and even reinforced in the Bilibid as prisoners figured to become objects of scientific inquiry.

Notable example in this aspect is the project undertaken by anthropologist Daniel Folkmar wherein Bilibid was transformed into an anthropological laboratory utilizing the inmates as samples in his compilation of the Album of Philippine Types exhibited at the St. Louis Exposition in 1904 (Folkmar 1904; Kramer 2006). The prisoners, characterized as representatives of the many ethno-linguistic groups were made to pose for the album. The project was lamented by historian Resil Mojares as being an example of “photography as rape” (Mojares 1997) as it embodied racist classifications and served the very purpose of relegating Filipinos as inferior races that it was acceptable to treat them like laboratory mice.

From here we see that the Bilibid, as it mirrored the colonial projects aimed at asserting benevolence, definitely also figured to be a stage where racism evinced, providing further justification for maintaining the colonial order. It therefore served a wider purpose beyond incarcerating law transgressors.

Utilizing the bodies of prisoners did not stop at photography and anthropometric measurements. Experiments in the then rising field of tropical medicine also sought the bodies of prisoners at Bilibid. Infamous among these experiments would be that done by Richard Pearson Strong and his research on cholera. The experiment resulted in a tragedy as 13 of the 24 inmates he involved in the experiment died after being inoculated with serums contaminated with the plague virus (Chernin 1989; Gutierrez 2010). The inmates in Bilibid also aided in the researches of one of the pioneering criminologists Sixto delos Angeles as he ventured in researches under the Lombrosian tradition (Gutierrez 2010).

CONCLUDING REMARKS: SOCIETY IN PRISON, PRISON IN SOCIETY

Running through this paper are three main themes. Firstly, the paper was set to write an account of the history of the Bilibid Prison in the context of the American colonialism. Secondly, it sought to view the
prison as a cultural artifact that embodied culture meanings that can help in deepening our understanding of the American colonial period. Lastly, it is hoped that the ruminations herein will show the value of writing about the prison in understanding society.

Established in the Spanish regime, the Bilibid was inherited by the Americans and they continued to utilize the prison as the central station in managing the penal system in the colony. In looking at the American management of the Bilibid we see how the multifaceted approach of the Americans in extending its image of being an exceptional colonizer was mirrored in the prison. Prisoners were made to experience the “benevolent” rule of the Americans as they experienced employment in the esteemed industrial division and prison school. Heath and sanitation was thoroughly monitored. Religious activities were encouraged. Various activities, athletic and artistic were introduced.

On the part of the Americans, however, these efforts were not carried out without careful consideration of their impact to the wider endeavor of further justification and maintenance of the colonial order. In the course of maximizing the potential of the prison as a colonial project, the Bilibid was showcased to the world as a bastion of American benevolence and the success of the civilizing mission. This did not go in vain as the thousands of visitors lauded the way the penitentiary was managed and gave the colonizers a pat on the back.

In spite of this, the reality of colonialism’s ethnocentric, even racist, view of the colonized people as inferior, dependent and expendable also manifested in the management of Bilibid. Prisoners were used as laboratory subjects and presented in exhibitions as objects of curiosity and spectacle. The idea that the prison served as a tourist attraction also placed the prisoners within the gaze of judging public onlookers from the free society. The Americans were not the sole recipients of the judgment in their management of the Bilibid, the Filipinos were also carefully monitored as the prison became another arena where Filipino capacities for self-rule were gauged as exemplified in the establishment of the prison court and prison trusty police systems as well as the close monitoring of inmate participation in the industrial division.

With the preceding discussions, the paper hopes to echo the assertion of David Garland to view punishment, in this case prison and imprisonment, as a social institution in itself (Garland 1991a). Locating this study in the colonial context, I believe illustrates how prisons are, in the words of Garland,

“not just crime-control mechanism[s] but instead distinctive and rather complex social institution[s] that, in its routine practices, somehow contrives to condense a whole web of social relations and cultural meanings” (Garland 1991b: 157).

In the colonial context, we see the prison as a clear site of power relations and an effective crucible to showcase the colonizer’s mindset and ideals.

Moreover, we see in the history of the prison how the institution of punishment, as Garland further notes, is influenced by the social milieu and how in turn the prisons influence the larger society where it functions (Garland 1991a). In the discussion, we see that the rehabilitative ideal became an avenue to showcase American benevolence and justify many prison policies as consistent with the civilizing nature of American
rule. On the other hand, the prison contributed to the legitimization of the American imperial project by presenting Bilibid as a showcase of the civilizing mission of the US. This posturing further aided the rationale to carry out racialized experiments and research that compromised Filipinos inmates' lives and well-being or relegated them to inferior status.

To end, this paper hopes to contribute to the continuously growing literature on historical criminology and penology and historical sociology. Further research is necessary to strengthen and address the limitations of this inquiry. It is nonetheless hoped that this work can inspire more researches to understand the institution of punishment in the Philippines since engaging in this kind of research can yield valuable information to further understand our society. In the case of this paper, I sought to present how the prison system, represented by the Bilibid, figured to be an important thread utilized by the Americans in weaving the fabric of colonial domination.

References

Historical Documents


Books and Journals


