Chapter 1

A World Apart?

Spanish conquest and colonization of the Philippines brought fundamental changes to the political, economic, social, and cultural life of the islands. Scholarly studies of the early colonial period, such as those by John Phelan, Nicholas Cushner, and Martin Noone have focused on the initial conquest of the islands and Spanish attempts to set up an effective administration, while others, such as Horacio de la Costa, Pablo Fernández, and Vicente Rafael, have examined the role of the missionary orders and the process of Christian conversion. While these dimensions are critical to understanding the history of the early Spanish Philippines, the demographic decline that accompanied Spanish conquest and early colonial rule has not received such focused attention. This is partly because it is generally assumed that the Filipino population did not suffer a demographic collapse on the same scale as the native population of the Americas, where within the first 150 years of European contact it may have declined by as much as 90 percent, from about 50 to 60 million to only 6.5 million. Comparing the colonial experiences of Mexico and the Philippines, John Phelan concluded that “conquest did not unleash a sharp decline of the Filipino population.” Inasmuch as attention has been paid to demographic decline in the early colonial Philippines, it has been attributed to the impact of the Hispano-Dutch War between 1609 and 1648, which generated extraordinary demands for labor and supplies. Meanwhile the initial impact of conquest itself has often been overlooked.

While recognizing the demographic impact of the Hispano-Dutch War, this study aims to fill this gap in the literature and will argue that the Filipino population suffered a greater decline in the early Spanish period than has previously been thought and that the prolonged decline brought significant changes to Filipino society even in regions that were distant from Manila. Even though demographic trends in the Spanish Philippines were similar to those in other parts of the Southeast Asian archipelago, this study will argue that the factors underpinning them were different.

Disease or Conquest?

In attempting to explain why demographic decline in the Philippines was not as great as in the Americas, two explanations have commonly been suggested: first, that the Filipino population possessed immunity to the Old World diseases that
devastated American populations, and second, that conquest in the Philippines was more benign. Before exploring these propositions in more detail, it is necessary to note that any analysis of demographic trends is dependent on an accurate assessment of the size of the initial population.

One reason why scholars may believe that population decline in the Philippines was limited in the early Spanish period is because the size of the pre-Spanish population has been underestimated. Current estimates for the population in 1565 range from 1 to 1.25 million. These figures generally exclude Mindanao, as will this study, because most of the island did not come under effective Spanish administration in the early colonial period. These proposed estimates are not derived from a detailed analysis of documentary evidence, but are best guesses based on a limited range of sources. The extent of any decline during the colonial period has not been investigated for the Philippines as a whole, though a few in-depth studies exist for some islands, such as Cebu and Negros. This study will undertake a detailed analysis of the population in each island and region in 1565 and will suggest that the pre-Spanish population probably exceeded 1.5 million. Despite the higher estimate, it will show that like other islands in the Southeast Asian archipelago, population densities were low.

Differences in the scale of depopulation in the Philippines and the Americas in the early colonial period are usually explained by differences in the level of immunity that native peoples had acquired to Old World diseases in pre-Spanish times. In the Americas, the lack of immunity meant that in the early colonial period it was common for a single epidemic of smallpox, measles, plague, typhus, or influenza to result in the death of one-quarter, one-third, or even one-half of the population of a region. Filipinos on the other hand are thought to have acquired some immunity to Old World diseases in pre-Spanish times as a result of frequent contacts with regions in Asia where they had become endemic. The latter assertion has not been investigated directly, but rather inferred from the allegedly low level of population decline in the early colonial period. Since the issue of immunity and the impact of Old World diseases are so central to understanding the level of depopulation in the Philippines, particularly compared to the Americas, they will be considered separately in chapter 2.

Apart from the issue of immunity to Old World diseases, several other factors are generally thought to have moderated levels of demographic decline in the Philippines. First, it is often argued that compared to the Americas, the conquest of the Philippines was a relatively peaceful affair. This is sometimes attributed to the late settlement of the islands, which meant that the Spanish Crown could draw on seventy years’ experience of conquest in the Americas. The devastating impact of conquest on native peoples there prompted theological and legal debates in Spain over the treatment of indigenous peoples and the policies that should be pursued in the acquisition of new territories. As a concerned monarch and devout Catholic, Philip II was determined that the demographic disaster that had occurred in the Americas should not be repeated in his newly acquired colony. Second, it is suggested that the absence of significant mineral deposits and dense native populations
from which tribute and labor might be exacted left little to fire the imagination of
would-be conquistadors and colonists. Although trade with China and other parts
of Asia constituted an attraction for some, the long distance from Spain and Mexico
and the early reputation of the islands as being unhealthy for Europeans limited the
number of settlers. Those who came to the islands were attracted by opportunities
for trade rather than the development of agricultural or mining enterprises, and
thus they remained concentrated in and around Manila. The alienation of native
lands therefore proceeded more slowly in the Philippines, and the large-scale labor
drafts that were often associated with mining in Spanish America were absent.
As a consequence, it is argued, Filipino societies did not experience such extensive
restructuring as occurred among many groups in Spanish America.

The lack of productive enterprises in the Philippines also meant that it pro-
duced insufficient profits to cover the maintenance of the colony and had to be
subsidized by the royal exchequer. As a result, the administration was minimal and
most Filipinos rarely came into contact with Spanish officials. In many regions, par-
ish priests, who were often members of the missionary orders, were the main repre-
sentatives of Spanish authority. John Phelan has therefore described the occupation
of the Philippines as “essentially a missionary enterprise.” In 1588 there were just
over 700 Spaniards in the Philippines and of these about 150 were priests. For this
reason, colonial rule in the islands is often considered to have been more benign.
These propositions are worthy of further discussion.

A New Beginning?

Following Ferdinand Magellan’s death at Mactan in Cebu in 1521, Spain sponsored
several unsuccessful expeditions to the Philippines under Juan García Jofre de Loay-
sa, Alvaro de Saavedra, and Ruy López de Villalobos. Spain’s continuing interest
in the islands lay in establishing a foothold in the Southeast Asian spice trade, which
at that time was dominated by the Portuguese. The instructions issued to Miguel
López de Legazpi in 1564 stipulated that his expedition was to bring back samples of
spices, discover a return route to New Spain, and not settle in the Maluku (Molucca-
cas) that the Crown had ceded to the Portuguese in 1529. Unusual in the context
of Spanish exploratory expeditions, Legazpi’s instructions contained no precise di-
rectives over the settlement of any newly discovered lands or the rewards that might
be bestowed on those who had taken part. Legazpi was permitted to barter with the
natives, and if there proved to be items of economic interest such as spices or gold,
he was to establish a settlement, report back to New Spain, and await further orders.
With these instructions he set forth for the Philippines.

At this time new conquests often employed the requerimiento. This was a
document that was read to newly encountered native peoples and called upon them
to recognize the superior authority of the Crown and Church, and if they did not
they could be subjugated by force of arms and their goods could be confiscated.
Patricia Seed argues that this proclamation had Islamic antecedents. At the launch
of a *jihād* (or struggle), subjugated peoples would be called upon to recognize the superior authority of Islam through the payment of tribute, the refusal of which provided justification for war. Nevertheless, under Islam subjugated peoples were not required to convert to the new religion, as was the case when the same procedure was adopted during the Christian Reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula.

Unease with the *requerimiento*’s credentials, and the seemingly farcical manner in which natives who had no knowledge of Christianity, let alone the Spanish language, were called upon to submit to the authority of the Catholic Church and Spanish rule, provoked an early debate over Spain’s dominion in the Indies and the basis on which “just war” might be conducted. During debates in the 1530s and 1540s, Francisco de Vitoria questioned the right of any temporal power to usurp the rights of non-Christian communities that belonged to them by virtue of reason and natural law, but he conceded that under the law of nations Spaniards had the right to trade with them and preach Christianity, while those being approached were required to accept them peacefully. If they did not, he argued, then this might form the basis of “just war.” The culmination of these discussions, held after conquest was largely a *fait accompli* in the Americas, was the great debate between the Dominican friar Bartolomé de las Casas and the Aristotelian scholar Ginés de Sepúlveda at Valladolid between 1550 and 1551.20

Although there was no decisive outcome to the debate, Las Casas’ insistence on the capacity of all peoples to become Christians and on their peaceful conversion had a significant influence on Philip II. Persistent criticism of the *requerimiento*, which came to symbolize the worst excesses of Spanish rule in the Americas, eventually led in 1573 to the introduction of new ordinances that indicated the procedures to be followed in undertaking new conquests. In these ordinances the term “conquest” was officially replaced by *pacificación*: “they are not to be called conquests; because they have to be undertaken in peace and charity as we wish.”21 The new ordinances reflected Philip II’s genuine concern for the treatment of his subjects that had been foreshadowed in his instructions to Legazpi. The Philippines would effectively be the testing ground for this more enlightened colonial policy. Circumstances within the islands meant that it was doomed to fail.

Although Legazpi tried to follow the Crown’s instructions, the first five years of the Spanish settlement in the islands proved particularly difficult due to shortages of provisions and threats of attack from the Portuguese. Soldiers sacked native villages, seizing food and other goods and enslaving the inhabitants. Hence the nature and impact of Spanish conquest differed little from events in the Caribbean more than half a century earlier. The Augustinian fathers Martín de Rada and Diego de Herrera, who accompanied Legazpi’s expedition, were outspoken critics of the actions of the soldiers; their criticism even extended to Legazpi himself for his failure to condemn the atrocities. In fact Legazpi did try to restrain the activities of the soldiers, but he stressed the great hardship they had endured and the need to grant them some favors.22 The Crown was slow to respond, but in 1568 relented and allowed the allocation of *encomiendas*.23
An *encomienda* was an allocation of native peoples to an individual that gave the *encomendero* the right to exact tribute, and up to 1549 also labor, in return for which he or she was supposed to see to their protection and instruction in the Catholic faith. In the Americas the *encomienda* contributed significantly to the dramatic decline in the native population, particularly in the Caribbean, and from an early date the Crown attempted to abolish it. However, it was clear that such privileges were essential if Spain were to maintain its tenuous foothold in the Philippines; any moral objections Philip II may have had about the *encomienda* were overshadowed by practical considerations. The *encomienda* gave legal license to private individuals to continue their hitherto illegal exactions, and the opportunity to initiate a less oppressive form of colonial rule was therefore lost. Although governors were at times reprimanded for not abiding by the new ordinances, the ideal of peaceful subjugation that permeated debates in Spain and Philip II’s colonial policy had little impact on the course of conquest in the Philippines.24

Philip II tried to reinforce his new policy by appointing to episcopal office ecclesiastics, such as the Dominicans Domingo de Salazar and Miguel de Benavides, who espoused the doctrines of Vitoria and Las Casas.25 These high church officials were actively involved in continuing debates over the treatment of native peoples and came into frequent and bitter conflict with the secular authorities.26 The great debate between Las Casas and Sepúlveda had not really resolved the issue of “just war” or established whether it was right to exact tribute from those who had not received Christian instruction.

In the Philippines the ban on slavery also continued to be hotly debated because of its prevalence in the islands. At an early stage it was recognized that it was impossible to prohibit native slavery or debt servitude since it was so deeply embedded in Philippine society. Debates therefore revolved around whether the Spanish should be allowed to acquire slaves on the grounds that it was better for them to be slaves under a Christian owner. While at times the Crown permitted the enslavement of Moros, the term applied to Muslims, it reaffirmed the general prohibition on Spaniards owning slaves in 1574, 1580, and 1589.27 Meanwhile native slavery persisted, though it gradually declined through the seventeenth century. The presence of Muslims, particularly in the southern Philippines, also brought another dimension to the issue of “just war” that had not featured in debates concerning the treatment of Indians in the Americas. Theological debates therefore continued and played a significant role in the course of events in the Philippines. It was not until 1692 that the transference of dependents through inheritance or purchase was effectively banned and the children of slaves born after that date were free.28

**Economic Priorities and Philippine Realities**

The economic imperative that initially drove the Spanish across the Pacific was to obtain a share in the spice trade that was controlled by the Portuguese. However, the resources they encountered in the islands failed to impress, and the Crown was
frequently asked to consider abandoning the islands. In the 1620s the Council of the Indies recommended that Spain relinquish the islands or swap them for Brazil. Cinnamon was found in Mindanao and at an early date identified as a potential export commodity, but Mindanao’s inhabitants were judged to be hostile. Throughout the islands the Spanish also encountered natives with gold jewelry, and during the conquest of Ilocos and Pangasinan exacted large quantities of gold. Despite expeditions in search of gold, the deposits they found did not appear to be extensive, particularly compared to the silver found in Mexico and Peru, and the Spanish therefore did not become heavily involved in mining and probably never knew the extent of gold deposits in the islands.

Both spices and gold soon appeared to offer few opportunities for profit compared to trade with China and other Asian regions. This trade revolved primarily around the exchange of Chinese silks for Mexican silver, but Manila was also well-located to develop as a major entrepôt where traders from all over Southeast Asia could exchange commodities such as spices from Maluku, pepper from Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula, and cotton cloth from India, as well as a range of fine goods such as porcelain, ivory, precious stones, and forest products such as resins, sandalwood, and deerskins. In the 1580s there was growing resentment of Chinese domination of much of this trade, and Spanish gaze began to turn to China itself.

Governor Sande was particularly enthusiastic about the conquest of China, and the religious orders saw the conversion of the Chinese as part of their evangelical mission; indeed many had gone to the Philippines precisely because they saw the islands as a stepping-stone to China. The ambitious Jesuit Father Alonso Sánchez even advocated a “just war” against the Chinese for their reluctance to receive foreigners and for their ill treatment and persecution of Christians. Apart from the fact that the conquest of China was unrealistic given the Philippines’s weak financial position and limited military capability, Philip II remained unenthusiastic about further conquests and more concerned about the threat from the Dutch and Protestantism. While trade with China made some individuals wealthy, the Philippines were only maintained as a Spanish colony by a royal subsidy from the Viceroyalty of Mexico known as the situado. It averaged about 250,000 pesos a year, though it was considerably higher during the Hispano-Dutch War and when the Spanish had control of their outposts in Maluku. The Philippines were also regarded as a drain on the Spanish economy, because silver produced in the Americas often found its way to Asia illegally through the hands of private traders. By the end of the sixteenth century this illegal trade amounted to about five million pesos a year. Merchants in Seville supported the proposal that Spain should abandon the islands since they saw the galleon trade as a threat to their control of trade with the American colonies. Nevertheless, religious and imperial considerations prevailed and the Philippines remained a Spanish colony despite the significant cost it represented.

The nature of Spanish rule in the Philippines was therefore to some extent different from that in most parts of Spanish America. However, through an examination of the early history of individual regions, this study will show that the conquest
itself was a bloodier affair than generally supposed and resulted in significant de-
population. It will also show that even though the Philippines might have lacked the
large-scale mining and agricultural enterprises found in the Americas, its population
was not spared persistent demands for tribute, labor, and supplies, on which the
survival of the colony depended, even in times of peace. These demands, which will
be elaborated upon in chapter 3, persisted throughout the colonial period, bringing
significant restructuring to Filipino economies and societies.

While it will be suggested in this study that the demographic impact of Span-
ish colonial rule in the Philippines may have been different from that in America, it
will also compare population trends following the arrival of Europeans with those
elsewhere in the Southeast Asian archipelago. Due to the paucity of quantitative
evidence, the demographic change in Southeast Asia prior to 1800 can be sketched
only in broad terms. In fact for this period, apart from parts of Indonesia, the
Philippines may be the best-documented region in the archipelago. Nevertheless,
the broad trends suggest that at the time Europeans arrived Southeast Asia was
characterized by low population densities that prevailed until the eighteenth and
nineteenth centuries, when population growth exceeded 1 percent a year. While
the latter growth is well-documented, much less is known about the sixteenth and
seventeenth centuries. The shortage of evidence has led to considerable specula-
tion on the causes of low population densities in pre-European times, such as inter-
polity conflict, birth and marriage practices, limitations on agricultural production, and
nutrition. Meanwhile, Anthony Reid has argued that the seventeenth century was
one of economic and demographic crisis in Southeast Asia as a whole. He has sug-
gested that an increase in military conflict and harsh conditions imposed by colonial
rule in certain export-producing regions were responsible for population decline
between 1500 and 1630. He also raises the question of whether climate change may
have played a role. This study will show that while demographic change in the
Philippines followed these broad trends, the importance of factors underlying them
were somewhat different, at least in emphasis.