

A QUESTION OF IDENTITY (3)

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One of the things that throw off foreigners is our system of Spanish family names. At the UN or any of its alphabet agencies, at diplomatic or trade conferences, foreign universities or firms, the Filipino representative is likely to be named, not Thieu Min or Ahmed Tagarito as one could expect of an Oriental from a Pacific archipelago near the heartland of Asia, but Gonzalo Fernandez y Castro or Luis Maria Coronado.

The reason for this disconcerting circumstance, apart from the historical accident of Western Catholicism (which gave us our first names) is an order handed down by the Spanish Governor Claveria on November 21, 1849, which decided once and for all what family names Filipinos should bear. The order – one of the most fascinating in our National Archives – lists the conditions which made it imperative in Spanish eyes. Most of the “natives” did not have family names. Those that did have adopted a few saints’ names, but thousands who were not related bore the same name, and this proliferation created untold confusion, hampered the administration of justice and had “transcendental civil, moral, and religious consequences,” since blood relationships (prior to marriage ceremonies, for instance) could not be traced. The Spanish government was also reacting to the crying need for a population census and other adequate statistics, as well as for efficient tax collection. Like all colonial governments it was also concerned about “population movements” and the secrecy with which it was possible to carry these out.

A “catalog of surnames” was then put together by the most important friars, that is, the Fathers Provincial of all religious orders, from a list of Spanish patronymics as well as glossaries of words from the dialects, other items taken from, as the order calls it “the vegetable and mineral kingdom”, and expectedly enough, geography. A copy of the catalog was sent to all provincial governors and thence apportioned among the *gobernadorcillos* and *cabecerias*, the period name for villages, with instructions that heads of families were to choose their surnames from the word lists.

The order left a lot of leeway for families “of Spanish, Chinese, or native origin” which had borne patronymics for generations, concerning itself only with those who had names of saints, those who had all-too-common names like *de la Cruz* and *de los Santos* (although *Cruz* appears again on the list) orphans and children of unknown fathers. A specific injunction was placed against adopting the names of ancient nobility, given as Lacandola, Mojica, Tupas, and Raja Matanda, except by those who clearly had a right to them. At first glance, the order appears logical and humane.

The most cursory reading, however, of the words, printed alphabetically, in long columns and in lower case reveals the sardonic humor of the Spanish rulers. There is

unmistakable black comedy in suggesting to (and, in most cases, imposing upon) an illiterate *pater familias* a surname from a list that included *unggoy, utut, taba, estupido, ladron, aso, ano, longaniza, tortura, cuca, daga* (without an accent) *maglasing, malo, and trasero*. Of course, most of the list was indeed made up of harmless and only mildly amusing words like, *asada, ticoy, tonelada, masarap, monggo, cronometo, and embalsamado*, and (contrary to a popular misconception) there was an abundance of honest-to-goodness native words like *salaysalay, oloc-oloc, ocaycayan, and panganiban*. Still, any modern census list will reveal not only an abject cultural pupilage but also pronounced streak of Spanish cruelty.

Such famous names as *Magsaysay, Romulo, and Taruc* were apparently chosen from the Claveria list of 1849. *Marcos* appears only in the singular as *Marco* and *Osmeña* does not appear at all. *Salonga* is written *salongamoy* which may not be the same word at all since the name *Salonga* turns up almost two hundred years earlier in the first revolt of the Tondon datus, as one of the ringleaders.

The surname I was born with was also picked out from the Claveria catalog by a warlike ancestor whose bloodlust must have been aroused by the old family name of Santa Rosa. One can easily understand why someone who had been called *Saint Rose* for generations would be prickly and martial enough to want to be known as a Spanish warrior.

My other surname went by two other versions in Claveria: *nacpil* and *nacapili*, the latter oddly apt and flattering but with an ominous ring of self-determination. *Nacapili* – to have chosen! Not many people have been able, after all, to choose, as we Filipinos did, their own identity.

20 July 1969