



*“The pen is mightier than the sword.”*

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## **FILIPINOS ARE PRETENDING TO BE POOR**

**By: Ben Emata**

MANILA - - I came in four days ago from Cagayan de Oro on my way back to San Francisco. I still have the hangover of having been with friends and relatives for more than three weeks after having been away for more than eight years. The joy of being reunited with them briefly is still in my nerves. My original plan was to make a side trip to Bangkok, Thailand as well as Beijing and Tokyo but I felt I was not feeling so well. It was like I was going to get ill any moment. So I cancelled all other trips and proceeded direct to San Francisco. Just in time I got severe cough and cold and little fever. I was practically down. I thought the freezing cool of my air-conditioned room of a beautiful hotel along Recto Avenue was the culprit. It was so hot outside and so abruptly cold in my room.

Anyway, a good friend, Raf Benaldo, met me somewhere in Makati. Raf in his concurrent capacity is Regional Director of the Department of Interior and Local Government and Asst. Secretary to the cabinet secretary. He was then producer of GMA TV-12 Newscast I worked with in the early 80's in Cagayan de Oro while he was also In-charge of the graduate studies of Xavier University. He took me on a tour around the business sectors of Metro Manila.

Raf brought me to the Ortigas malls, Mandaluyong, Makati, Cubao and so many others. While recalling those glorious moments of our media works, we walked, climbed up high rise buildings, taking escalators, stairways, hallways, ran along pedestrian lanes - - a lot of physical exercises we never did before. In the evening, Raf's wife, Alming, joined us for a very tasty dinner that was appetizing real seafood. I cannot remember which restaurant was that but the place was just nice - - a cluster of nipa huts where we can eat with our bare hands. I had never been exposed to such kind of place anytime anywhere in Manila or elsewhere. After dinner, Raf and Alming brought me next to one of the biggest hotels I forgot its name. As we approach the building, I know there was something nice within because of the luxurious bright imported chandeliers that abound the place. We went to the coffee shop that is larger than a basketball court where we had coffee and cookies. Raf had a lot of friends around who were guests themselves that included Army Generals, high-ranking public officials. He introduced me to them as a journalist from USA. In 1997 when I also visited Raf in Manila, he also treated me to the best places that only the affluents often go. I can see the test of our friendship that started when I worked for him in his TV production.

I discovered that malls in Metro Manila are much, much better than those in many cities of California. The better malls in Northern California are Eastridge, Hillsdale, Stanford, Serramonte and Oakridge but these were of no match to the ones we have gone to in Mandaluyong, Makati, Cubao, Pasig and Manila. Philippine malls are so large that it has enough spaces for bigger stores, playground for kids, display areas, ornaments and other facilities. They usually have four to five and



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even more stories complete with escalators and elevators. And to my surprise again, the malls here carry European big factories names and famous brands like Calvin Klein, Dior, Gucci, Prada, Ray band - - you name it they have it. And on top of that are famous Philippine brands that usually are not available in USA. These malls have movie theaters too that exhibit premiere showing of new films both imported and local. The stores within the malls have famous names that have been in business for many years.

The Food Courts in malls are so large that it can hold hundreds of customers in sitting position at any given time. An array of local and foreign foods is available with experienced chefs from China, England, France and other countries. The tables and Chairs are made of nice local materials like those made with rattans, bamboos and wood. Right in the dining areas are beautiful flowers, little gardens, waterfalls, or great paintings. And there was continuous background music. People walk around in large numbers in big rows and still there is no crowding everywhere.

One thing that caught my attention was the absence of shanties or small barong-barongs during the Marcos era. They were abundant along esteros and even the Pasig River especially in the vicinity of Quiapo and Intramuros. In its place are tall buildings, condominiums, apartments and big storage structures. I used to be a Manila resident for a good number of years in the late 60's while I was enrolled in a private university within the university belt nearby. I did not realize that the squatters in those depressed areas were actually relocated somewhere at the government's expense to give way to modernization and growth.

And out of sight also are those monkey-looking, old motor vehicles better known as jeepneys plying the Quiapo-Cubao, Dasmarinas, Project 6, Dimasalang and nearby routes were gone too and were replaced by newer models from China, Taiwan and Japan. There were many new streets that were not there when I was a Manilan more than 30 years ago. The sidewalk vendors of course, are still there and they are as usual lording it out over the area to the Quiapo Church. The is true to the sidewalks that led to the Santa Cruz area and Rizal Avenue. These places look very different now in the sense that they lost their glamour as queen of shopping center in downtown Manila. They still have those department stores but in small quantity and they had to co-exist now with the sidewalk vendors. Avenida and immediate vicinities look deserted when the Light Railway started operating. People just pass by the place and proceed to the train station. It is the Light rail system that is now the cream of transportation in Metro Manila. The coaches are air-conditioned and they come on time. Even the wealthy people ride the LRT since it gives them pleasure and pride.

Metro Manila has grown a lot maybe a hundred fold. World-class shopping centers are a lot in Makati, Mandaluyong, Pasig, Cubao, Caloocan, Pasay and Paranaque. The trains have help eased traffic and it put commuters to their destinations at a faster intervals. The areas of coverage are Edsa from Caloocan to Baclaran; Baclaran to Taft then Rizal Avenue to Caloocan; Caloocan via Rizal Avenue and Recto Avenue to Cubao. These are the streets that really gave headaches to commuters in the 60's until then dictator Pres. Ferdinand Marcos thought of establishing the train that turned out to be the favorite of the commuters.



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It seems people have money! I did not see anyone who looks hungry. Even the sidewalk vendors who are supposed to be classified as poor are making good money. I talked to one who had his business at the Divisoria in Tondo whom I thought was living with just enough for food, turned out to be owner of two residential houses in the district. He owns a passenger vehicle and an owner type service jeep. It was only in Quiapo Church that I saw beggar because that place had always been heaven to beggar business. These beggars there actually are “planted” workers everyday and are earning daily wages from beggar businessmen. They disguise as poor people but actually they own cars or motorcycle.

I went to various restaurants and saw people in long line to be seated. The restaurants are filled to capacity and everyone seems to enjoy lunch or dinner. I was stunned to see at least three tables whose diners were drinking beer and Tanduay rum at noontime. They can afford to drink wine while having lunch. Then I went to several movie houses in the mulls and saw for myself the long line of moviegoers waiting for their turn to buy tickets. The moviegoers include small kids and families in groups. And as they prepare to go inside the theaters, they buy all kinds of snacks in the sidewalks as well as soft drinks or soda.

The places I have seen so much money in cash dancing from one hand to another are in the malls and in big grocery and department stores in located nearby. People shop around as if there is going to be war next day especially food as if there is famine coming in a few days. They have lots of money. I saw shoppers with large denomination of cash as well as credit cards and ATM card. Many buy expensive items of popular brands, shirts, pants, formal attires, shoes, socks and hats. Others buy toys, sporting goods, bikes, camping materials, sports clothes and even shorts. I have not seen poverty in Manila and many places in Mindanao.

I surmised Filipinos are wealthy people but are trying to exercise low profile perhaps to avoid being robbed or kidnapped. Many have their own cars or other kind of rides. Everyone has cell phones even the shoeshine boys and sidewalk vendors. They come out from stores with large bundles of things they purchased. Refreshment parlors are also full with people taking snacks or merienda. Filipinos eat several times a day unlike the Americans. Early in the morning they take coffee and bread. That was only a starter for the day to be followed at 8:00 am with full breakfast. At 10 am, they take snacks to be followed by regular heavy lunch. At 3:00 pm, they take snack again to be followed by full dinner at 7:00 pm. The men usually drink beer or wine after dinner and another snack at 10:00 pm. Of course, these all entail a lot of money, which if one is poor cannot afford to survive such kind of life in a country whose people pretend to be poor.

Sometimes I think the Philippine national leadership is correct in claiming that the economy of the country is stable. The people, it seems, are contented, happy and many of their kids are enrolled in colleges and universities. They dress well in full cadence with modern living and fashion. I did not see the truth of the claim of the oppositions that the country is impoverish or that millions of Filipinos are hungry. Statistic did not show anyone who died for malnourishment or hunger. I have yet to see real poor people. Back to my city, I saw lots of merchandises in the markets that are for



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sale to the public. Everyday there are vegetables, meats, fish, rice, eggs and all basic commodities needed by everyone. Many of my friends in the media have invited me to dinner in different occasions and I saw them with lots of money in their pockets. I was looking for someone who is poor because my belief was that Filipinos are dying of poverty. It turned out they are even richer than me in terms of income and property. My brothers have each one or more cars for family service and yet I do not know them as millionaires. They are hardworking people though. No wonder majority of the Filipinos joins in a long line at the U. S. Embassy to apply for visas for USA and elsewhere because they want pleasure and tour around the world. Round trip airfare is no less than \$1,700 and certainly they are ready with that amount upon issuance of visas. Are we really poor? Where is poverty?

I went to at least two casinos in Manila and Pasay and there I saw lots of players who gamble heavily. They have money to spare for such kind of enjoyment. Some of them enjoy with wines while playing with slot machines and cards. The casinos have live band that give out fine music and even dancing and stage shows. It is first class and a destination for some foreign tourists.

In Mindanao, I went inside the Philippine National Bank where I maintain a dollar account. It took me more than two hours waiting for my turn because there were lots of people who deposit and/or withdraw cash. Banking there is not easy considering the number of people who have money and also using the facilities of the bank service. I also went to the Land Bank of the Philippines where I also maintain another account in pesos. I had to leave right away because I know I cannot be entertained in two hours of waiting. I returned next day at different times and saw that nothing has changed and people with money are there making transactions. There are long chairs in about ten rows like those in churches where people are seated while waiting for their number to be called. It was terrible. I could not wait and so again I went out without making any transaction.

In both banks I saw bundles upon bundles of cash, delivered, deposited, withdrawn or whatever. All tellers are busy with money and banks slips. People come in big bags with money. Armed security officers heavily guard the two government banks. And because I got discouraged of being entertained by a teller, I left the place and went direct to moneychangers situated near the banks. It turned out these small time moneychangers that specialize in dollar-peso and other international currencies, are actually giving bigger exchange rates.

Have a look at our universities and colleges and you will observe they turn out thousands of college graduates every year. They have a surplus of nursing, medicine, engineering, and other technical degrees. And their parents unlike in the USA where there are financial loans available to them supported these graduates. Tuitions are high, cost of books; the parents shoulder board and lodging, student's pocket money and all other expenses. One will be amazed at people from all walks of life having one cell phone at least. I asked how much this gadgets cost and I was told it is no less than five thousand pesos plus the fee for the provider of service.



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Overall I am convinced and I am proud to say that Filipinos are after all not poor and dying of hunger but wealthy individuals who just pretend to be poor for some reasons. The issue of poverty is that one promoted by the oppositions because they want to downgrade the credibility of the administration, which had been claiming that the economy of the country is stable.

If the country was bankrupt as the oppositions claimed, why are there so many wealthy congressmen and senators now after having been in the service for just a few years? Why are there pork barrels in Congress? Was there anyone in the government who claimed he was not paid of his salaries or wags? Why is there millions of corruption in the government?